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THE OTHER HALF OF THE PLANET

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THE IMAGE OF A MURDER
TOBY SCUFFELL
THREESCORE YEARS
THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SUN
DELAY OF DOOM
NO TIME FOR DEATH
DEATH AT SHINGLESTRAND

THE OTHER HALF OF THE PLANET

A Sequel to

“The Other Side of the Sun”

by

PAUL CAPON



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TO
STELLA

FOREWORD

THIS novel is the sequel to another called *The Other Side of the Sun*, and this note is intended for those who have not read the earlier story.

The Other Side of the Sun concerned itself with the visit of a small party of explorers to Antigeos, an imaginary planet whose existence was not discovered until the late nineteen-sixties. That this planet had escaped the astronomers' notice for so long was accounted for by the fact that it shared the Earth's orbit, revolving round the sun at the same speed as the Earth and at a point diametrically opposite us, so that, from our point of view, it was for ever hidden by the glare of the sun itself.

In all, six people undertake the journey to Antigeos. The leader of the expedition is Professor Jonah Pollenport, and he is accompanied by his assistant, Paul Greenwood, a Negro, and by Sam Spencross, designer of the spaceship in which the journey is made. These three constitute the spaceship's crew and also on board are two passengers who have helped finance the enterprise—Major Stewart McQuoid, representing certain rather sinister business interests, and young Timothy Penn, winner of a football-pool. The sixth member of the expedition is a stowaway—Rose Pollenport, daughter of the Professor.

Antigeos proves to be strangely similar to the Earth in some respects and markedly different in others. Its land-area is divided into two large continents, one centring on the North Pole and the other on the South, and separated from each other by a vast ocean that encircles the planet. It is upon the northern continent that the space-travellers land and they find it inhabited by a race of tall brown-skinned

people at a stage of civilisation somewhat in advance of our own.

The space-travellers, with the exception of McQuoid, are enchanted by the Antigeosians, and for a time all goes well. Pollenport settles down to a systematic study of the civilisation's history and science, and presently Rose and Timothy fall in love and marry, but this almost idyllic life is brought to a sudden end when news comes that McQuoid has escaped to the southern continent after murdering an Antigeosian.

The last chapter of the novel deals with preparations for the flight from Antigeos. Since Rose is now pregnant and unable to undertake the journey it is decided that she and Timothy shall stay behind to await the spaceship's return in three or four years' time, and the final scene describes them sitting on a mountainside watching the spaceship lumbering upwards towards the stratosphere. When it has disappeared into the glare, the reverberations of a tremendous explosion drift back to them, and they are left to wonder what disaster may or may not have overtaken the spaceship and its three occupants. . . .

PART I

THE GROUNDED SPACESHIP

(i)

NO one spoke during the journey across the valley. The three men in the rail-car sat slackly, with their arms resting along the backs of the seats, and all three wore the broad-brimmed native hats, for the sun was already so hot that its heat seemed to thrash the air. Heat-haze trembled above the rocks and boulders, and waves of heat beat up from the parched and fissured valley-bottom into the faces of the travellers. The only signs of vegetation were occasional clumps of cactus and the withered remnants of the giant Antigean fungus, black and tusky, that had sprung up during the last rainy season.

Two of the men in the rail-car wore Antigean tunics, but the third, Sam Spencross, wore English clothes, apart from the hat; and their style was just a trifle old-fashioned. They belonged to the first half of the twentieth century rather than the second, but whether or not Sam was aware that the younger generation no longer wore striped blazers and white flannel trousers, he had no intention of abandoning his. He looked like a slightly out-of-date bank-manager on his way to Sunday cricket and one could imagine him managing a bank and playing cricket equally well, with just the right admixture of caution and enterprise. He was good-looking in a conventional way, with a small clipped moustache, blue eyes and white, rather large teeth; and he looked younger than his fifty-three years.

However, Sam wasn't a bank-manager, and he hadn't played cricket for years. He was an inventor, an expert on

rockets and reaction-propulsion, and he was a long way from the nearest bank or cricket-pitch. In fact, he was a long way from the Earth itself. He was on the other side of the sun from it, on another planet, on Antigeos. . . .

This short journey along the valley-bottom was the first stage of a much longer journey, for the three travellers were about to set off for home. They were on their way to the spaceship that would take them back to the Earth, and none of them looked entirely happy about it.

Jonah Pollenport, sitting on Sam's right, seemed particularly preoccupied and this morning his usually cheerful disposition had succumbed to doubts and uncertainties. He was a big paunchy man with black fuzzy hair and strongly-marked features, and the thick lenses of his spectacles lent his face an enquiring, owl-like expression. He was the scientist who had been the instigator of the expedition and its leader, and now he was suffering the especial and appalling torments reserved for rational men when confronted by emotional disturbances that refuse to yield to reason. He could say to himself, as he had already said a hundred times: "It's quite obvious that we're acting for the best," but the formula made no difference to his misery.

He was thinking of his daughter, Rose. He had said good-bye to her less than half an hour before, assuring her that he would be back in three to four years, yet knowing that the chances were all against it. He had already survived one six-months journey through the immensities of space that separated Antigeos from the Earth and, better aware than anyone of how narrow were the margins of safety, he realised it was long odds against his surviving two more such passages.

But the spaceship was ready and waiting, and he could see it ahead of him, like a dark obelisk against the smouldering bronze of the sky. . . .

The third member of the party was Pollenport's assistant,

Paul Greenwood, a tall, loose-limbed man in his early thirties. He was a Negro, but at this time he was only a shade or two darker than his companions, so sun-tanned had they become during the months they had lived in this tropical and mountainous part of Antigeos. Since Paul was faced with neither Sam's technical anxieties nor Pollenport's emotional crisis he was the least preoccupied of the three and as the rail-car trundled along the valley he hummed the tune of "Dinah" under his breath, so softly that only he could hear it.

They were travelling almost due south, and in the opposite direction was the high, domed mountain that housed the only habitation in those parts, and it was there that Rose was living with her husband, Timothy Penn. Pollenport knew that by now they would be on the mountain-side waiting for the spaceship to take off, and he raised his field-glasses. He searched for Rose amongst the crowd of Antigeosians assembled on the slopes of the mountain, but after a minute or so he shook his head and lowered the glasses.

"Too much glare," he murmured.

"And they're a good way away," said Paul.

"Yes."

Paul yawned and tipped his hat over his eyes. "My stomach feels like I had butterflies for breakfast," he remarked.

Pollenport glanced at him sharply. "Well, would you rather not come?" he asked, with a touch of asperity.

"Oh, I'm coming all right," Paul assured him, grinning. "I guess I've got to leave this planet some time and it might as well be now."

Pollenport was annoyed with himself for the tone he had taken. He told himself that it was all wrong to visit the strain of his nervous tension upon the others and after a few moments he remarked more equably that he could have

wished they weren't leaving just yet. "There's so much we've had to leave uninvestigated," he said.

"Yes," Sam agreed, with a laugh. "The whole southern continent."

That was true, and now the whole of the planet's southern hemisphere would have to remain a mystery to them until they returned to Antigeos—if they ever returned.

The broad outlines of Antigean geography were simple. A vast and continuous ocean encircled the planet in the region of its equator, separating by thousands of miles the two great continental land-masses that centred upon either pole. The inhabitants of each continent had no communication with those of the other and so far the space-travellers had only had experience of the northern part. Only one of their original number, a Major Stewart McQuoid, had succeeded in reaching the southern continent, and his fate was uncertain. The single message he had managed to get to his one-time companions had told them no more than that he was a prisoner and that he had broken a leg; and the message had probably been several months old before they received it. . . .

A black chilling shadow rolled over the rail-car and its occupants—the shadow of the low, truncated mountain on which the spaceship had been built, and a moment later the rail-car entered a tunnel bored in the mountain's side. The air was cooler in the tunnel, and after about a minute the darkness yielded to artificial light, illuminating a narrow platform hewn out of the rock.

A group of four or five Antigeosians were waiting on the platform and as Pollenport brought the rail-car to a standstill one of them came forward and greeted the travellers with a grave "Good morning".

This was Horatio, the chief engineer on the construction-site, and he had acquired several English phrases during the building of the spaceship, but he gave them all the flat

colourless intonation that seemed inseparable from Antigean voices.

Amongst themselves, the Antigeosians rarely used their voices. In fact, they had no more than a dozen words capable of audible expression and, although they could acquire the principles of English with an almost humiliating ease, the subtleties of inflection were beyond them. Their own language comprised an endless variety of manual gestures and it was impossible for anyone from the Earth to learn it, since its interpretation depended upon the possession of an extra sense—a sense of movement that was independent of the visual impression. Every Antigeosian had small horn-like antennæ on his forehead; these were the organs of the extra sense, and they were as sensitive to the expressions of movement as our eyes are to light-waves or our ears to sound. . . .

Sam climbed out of the rail-car and the others followed him. "Well, Horatio, are we all set?" he asked.

"All set," echoed Horatio, smiling. "Go up now?"

He led the way across the platform to the cage of a large lift. The travellers crowded in, Horatio touched a lever and the lift slowly ascended the shaft that led up to the mountain's flat top.

Sam was first out of the lift and, with a hint of self-satisfaction, he gazed up at the spaceship resting against its launching-cradle. Together, the spaceship and cradle formed an imposing four-hundred foot structure standing about fifty yards away across the dusty and uneven ground, and a number of grey-clad Antigeosians were clambering over the cradle's framework throwing off the last of the guy-ropes.

Strictly speaking, it was incorrect to term the whole of that torpedo-shaped immensity "a spaceship". All the lower part of it was no more than a huge booster-rocket intended only to lift the spaceship proper through the layers

of atmosphere, and the cone-shaped head of the machine was simply an asbestos-and-kaolin carapace designed to protect the spaceship from the heat engendered by atmospheric friction as the contrivance roared upwards through the stratosphere. A small charge of cordite would pulverise the carapace as soon as the booster-rocket was exhausted, and then the rocket's empty shell would fall away, drifting back to Antigeos by parachute. The spaceship itself was spherical, fashioned mainly out of a transparent plastic called "lucidex", and once the booster rocket had done its work this sphere would be left to continue on its way alone, using its own reaction motor to hoist its speed to the eight miles a second needed to escape from the gravitational field. The spaceship's name was sufficiently unpretentious—long ago Pollenport had christened it simply the *Skylark*. . . .

Horatio stopped when they arrived at the foot of the first series of ladders that zigzagged upwards through the launching-cradle's framework. He looked up at the sky, shading his eyes against the sun, and laughed gently, laughing almost silently as was the Antigean way. Then he touched Pollenport's shoulder with the gesture that the Antigeosians used for both greeting and farewell.

Pollenport touched his shoulder in return.

"Why do you laugh?" he asked.

Horatio's arm swept the sky, then he pointed to the spaceship. "Sky so big, this so little," he said.

Sam took umbrage. "Don't see what's funny about it," he said. "You can say what you like, but you've got to admit the *Skylark*'s practical. It got us here, didn't it?"

Horatio understood almost nothing of that, but he touched Sam's shoulder affectionately and said: "Good-bye. I wait you come back."

"Yes, we'll come back all right," said Sam. "And don't think I'm not grateful. You and the other chaps are the goods all right. Only I don't see why you have to laugh . . ."

Paul winked at Horatio and murmured: "There, that's what you get for building him a spaceship. Some guys are never satisfied."

Horatio smiled uncomprehendingly, and touched Paul's shoulder.

"Good-bye," he said, and at the same moment dozens of Antigeosians that had helped to build the spaceship came crowding round, laughing and gesticulating; and the space-travellers were not allowed to go until each of them had had his shoulder touched by every one of the Antigeosians. . . .

(ii)

THE *Skylark's* control compartment resembled a conservatory, the light had a greenish tinge, and the air smelt damp and earthy. For these resemblances the spreading leaves of a luxuriant pumpkin-like plant were responsible. A trough filled with soil ran round the floor's circumference, fitting against the walls, and in it the plants had their roots.

Pollenport had shipped this phalanx of vegetation to replace the oxygen-making apparatus that had been smashed on the outward journey, and it was intended that the plants should convert the carbon dioxide exhaled by the crew back into oxygen. Pollenport and a number of Antigean botanists had experimented for weeks to find the most suitable plant, and the pumpkin had won with the discovery that a man's normal oxygen needs could be supplied by as little as nine square feet of the plant's leaf surface. . . .

Sam pushed aside the foliage and gazed down through the lucidex and through the port-hole that had been cut in the carapace, and Pollenport joined him. They were alone in the control compartment—Paul was in the bunkroom below, securely strapped into his bunk. Beneath them they could see the construction-site with a dozen or so Antigeosians

hurrying across it towards the lift shaft, and two miles farther on was the domed mountain where Rose and Timothy waited, and hardly breathed.

Now that Pollenport was on the brink of the irrevocable he had given up trying to sort out his emotional confusion. He was still unable to decide whether he had really done the right thing in leaving Rose and Timothy behind, and for the first time in his life his normal habit of objectivity was useless in helping him to a decision.

Sam was also troubled, but for different reasons. At the previous launching—from the earth—his mood had been one of absolute confidence, and now that confidence was lacking. He was worried about the booster-rocket. A good deal of its construction he had had to take on trust, hoping against hope that the Antigeosians had interpreted his specifications accurately. Neither he nor Pollenport had ever been able to make much sense of the native systems of mathematics and, although the Antigeosians claimed to understand our systems, Sam was uneasy. Many details he had been able to check empirically, but not everything. Their alloys, for instance. . . .

The little party of Antigeosians had arrived at the lift shaft. Horatio was easily recognisable since he was the tallest, and now he turned and looked towards the spaceship. He waited until his companions were all safely in the lift, then turned and waved a white cloth vigorously.

"All clear," Sam muttered, and moved across the compartment to the instrument panel.

Pollenport dropped to one of the two sponge-rubber mattresses that were on the floor and, lying on his back, took out a stop-watch. He held it above his face and supported his wrist with his other hand, knowing from previous experience that all his strength would be needed to keep the hand that held the watch from crashing down into his face once the spaceship started to ascend.

"Check with Paul," he murmured.

Sam turned to the intercom and pressed a switch. "Paul? All set for take-off?" he asked, and Paul's voice crackled huskily from the speaker. "Sure—I'm all set."

Pollenport made quite certain that he was within reach of the press-stud that would explode the carapace, and then spoke quietly: "Okay?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then this is it," said Pollenport, with his gaze on the stop-watch. "Start up the fuel pumps."

Sam briskly pushed down the handle of a small plunger, and waited. For a second there was absolute silence, then, almost imperceptibly at first, the whole structure trembled, the streak of reddish sunlight slanting across the floor from the port-hole quivered gently and the leaves of the pumpkin plant rustled as if a wind had sprung up.

"Stand by for ignition," said Pollenport, and the thumping of his heart matched the ticking of the stop-watch.

Sam stood with a finger on the ignition-switch and gazed at Pollenport, and whole eons of time crept by before Pollenport spoke again.

"One!" he exclaimed at last, and, after a pause: "Two!" Another pause. "Three!" A third pause, then: "*Right!*"

Sam depressed the switch, and threw himself on to the second mattress.

A rumble that began as a murmur swelled to a roar, and, deafened by its thunder, Sam became conscious of an enormous almost insufferable weight pressing against him from beneath. Every breath had to be fought for and out of the corner of his eye he saw the pumpkin's foliage flatten and sink towards the floor as if a sudden squall were beating down upon it.

Tentative feelings of relief began to replace his doubts, and he told himself that the spaceship was rising as steadily and as certainly as upon its earlier launching. As before,

there was no impression of speed, and nothing to indicate that the *Skylark* was rocketing through the atmosphere at some hundreds of miles an hour until suddenly the roar of the motor sheered off into silence as the spaceship reached a speed faster than that of sound.

Pollenport's face was scarlet from the exertion of holding the stop-watch steady and, in spite of carapace and lucidex, the spaceship's interior was becoming a furnace of super-heated air. Sam was sweating like a cart-horse and the muscles of his back ached under the pressure of the relentless acceleration.

The splinter of sunlight, falling across the compartment, slowly changed colour. It changed from bronze to orange, then to a yellow that become progressively paler until it achieved a whiteness as pure as that of white-hot steel and, as Sam watched this, he suddenly became aware of something else—that the angle formed by the shaft of sunlight and the floor was growing acute at a rate far greater than could be accounted for by the calculated trajectory. In other words, the spaceship was heeling over in mid-flight!

Struggling against the force of the *Skylark's* momentum he dragged himself to his knees, then climbed to his feet as laboriously as if he had two or three hundredweight of lead on his back. He clutched the rim of the huge controlling wheel and swung himself round until he faced the instrument panel. A glance was enough to convince him that there could be no doubt about it—the spaceship's trajectory was flattening out at a horrifying rate.

"Jonah!" he yelled. "The carapace——"

But his shout came too late, and he was interrupted by a violent and uncanny disturbance as a noiseless force seized the *Skylark* and made it pitch like a ping-pong ball in a storm. Sam was thrown to the floor and a moment later the sun's white glare burst full upon the compartment

flooding it with a dazzling brilliance. The carapace had disintegrated.

A conflict of forces seemed momentarily to check the spaceship in its career and, in fact, must have done so because in the next instant the two men heard a low thunderous roar as the noise of the explosion that had caused the havoc caught up with them, and it was then that they realised what must have happened—the booster-rocket had burst, freeing the carapace and leaving the *Skylark* deserted in the troposphere.

The vessel was falling. It was still well within the field of gravitation, and it fell rapidly, spinning as it fell. Sam clung to the big wheel and Pollenport braced himself against its supports, and the fabric of the spaceship was shaken by a series of thumps as heavy objects such as the accumulators in the generator-room and packages in the store-compartment broke loose and crashed against the walls. In the central control compartment itself the pumpkin plants started to shift, so that when presently the *Skylark* turned turtle showers of soil and crushed foliage slithered down the curved walls and washed back and forth over the lucidex.

Sam knew it was hopeless to think they could escape by starting up the *Skylark's* own motor. The heavy-rimmed wheel was only an effective means of control outside the gravitational field, and if the motor were started up, the *Skylark* would merely behave like a toy balloon from which the air is suddenly released—it would simply rocket drunkenly across the sky for some hundreds of miles and finally crash.

No, there was only one hope and that a slender one—the parachute, and before releasing it Sam would have to wait for air-resistance to steady the worst of the spaceship's lurchings.

He thought of Paul, alone in the bunkroom, and struggled

to hold himself steady enough to use the intercom. He managed it at last and shouted: "Paul? Paul, how're you making out?" but the instrument seemed dead and he supposed it was out of action.

"Paul!" he shouted again, but there was no reply, no sound at all except the noise of the air rushing past the lucidex as the *Skylark* fell back towards Antigeos. According to the instruments, the spaceship still had a hundred thousand feet to drop. . . .

(iii)

IN the first terrifying moment of the explosion Paul tugged desperately at the straps that held him, then as sunlight burst into the bunkroom and the violence of the first impact dispersed, his panic subsided and he told himself that, come what might, he was probably as safe in his bunk as anywhere else.

He had no idea of what was happening. He only knew that the carapace and booster-rocket had vanished and that the *Skylark* was dancing about like a tennis-ball in a maelstrom, and when the spaceship fell back into the roar of the explosion that had already happened, he thought that a new danger threatened, muttered wildly: "This is it . . ." and resigned himself to death—and was amazed as moment followed moment to find himself still alive. Subtle rotary motions possessed the *Skylark*, and Paul was conscious that his body, strapped in the bunk, was slowly wheeling end over end, with his midriff as its axis, rolling at the same time, and he clutched the straps and closed his eyes in an attempt to ward off nausea.

Obviously the *Skylark* was out of control and falling fast, and he expected at every second to hear the racket of its motor starting up, but when more than a minute had passed

and the motor was still silent, he opened his eyes and gazed out through the lucidex. He caught a glimpse of a reeling sky, almost black at this altitude, its place was taken by an expanse of dazzling white which he knew must be cloud-fields hiding the surface of Antigeos, and then the sky reeled into view once more. . . .

So far he had hardly had time to realise his fear, but now, as he shouted "Sam!" into the intercom and no one answered, terror clawed at his consciousness, and the idea came to him that perhaps both Sam and Jonah were dead, killed by that first mysterious turbulence.

The thought of being quite alone, heading for a certain death, was so terrible that he refused to entertain it for more than a moment, and the worst of his fear passed. His natural courage asserted itself, bore down upon his terror and almost banished it. "Hell, don't panic!" he adjured himself. "Take it easy. You're all right so far," which, apart from the matter of falling at many miles a minute through space, was true enough.

The *Skylark* was steadyng up. The greater weight of its lower half was making itself felt, and the vessel was no longer spinning over and over—it was now falling like an autumn leaf, gently turning, and rocking as it turned. Through the lucidex Paul could see the plane of the cloud-fields wheeling beneath him, tilting back and forth, and higher than the clouds the sky was a flood of clear blue light.

At that altitude the air was so thin as to be almost non-existent, yet so tremendous was the speed of the *Skylark's* fall that a slip-stream was created, and Paul could hear the air whispering past the hull and moaning in the exhaust-nozzle. He also heard Sam's voice shouting to him down the communication-shaft, and was considerably cheered by it as this was the first intimation he had had that the others had survived.

"Intercom's packed up!" Sam yelled. "Hold everything—about to use parachute!"

"Okay!" Paul yelled, and his spirits soared exultantly. The parachute! Then there was still a chance of survival . . .

The sky immediately above the spaceship was hidden from him by the hull, but he pressed himself against the lucidex and gazed steadily upwards in the hope that he would catch at least a glimpse of the parachute as it opened.

A whole minute passed and nothing happened. Paul started to sweat with apprehension, and told himself that the release mechanism must have jammed—or perhaps the parachute had burst on opening. The external air might be rarefied, but at the rate they were falling the parachute would still be subjected to an enormous pressure. . . .

And then it happened. He saw nothing, but felt the *Skylark* buck and lift like a ship striking rock. The mattress beneath him seemed to become momentarily solid, and in his relief at realising that the parachute was holding he hardly noticed the discomfort of having the breath knocked from his body as his descent towards eternity was abruptly checked.

There was no movement of the air at that height. The *Skylark* swung gently on the cords, bringing the vast canopy into view, and now Paul felt that they might be suspended in the sky for ever, so little was there to show that the spaceship was still falling. The silence was absolute and uncanny, until presently he heard either Sam or Pollenport coming down the communication shaft.

It was Sam. He lowered himself into the compartment and came to Paul's bunk.

"So you're all right?" he asked, grinning.

"Sure. What happened?"

"The booster-rocket blew up," said Sam. "You know, I always felt the Antigeosians hadn't quite got the hang of light alloys, and that's what comes of having no aircraft

industry. And now the question is—where are we going to land?”

“You’ve no idea?”

“None. All I know is we’re some hundreds of miles south-east of the point we started from, and the cloud-fields are too dense to let us see what’s beneath us. But, of course, the chances are we’ll come down in the sea.”

“Yes. And then what do we do?”

“Well, we float. What’s more, we’ll float right side up, and since there’s food on board to last at least six months, we ought to be able to make ourselves moderately comfortable.”

“H’m’m,” said Paul, and smiled ruefully.

“Takes a little getting used to, doesn’t it?” said Sam, reaching for the rope ladder.

“What does?”

“Why, the idea of returning to Antigeos,” Sam explained. “If all had gone well we’d have been out in space by now. And instead of that we’re going back to Antigeos—perhaps for the rest of our lives. Even if we have all the luck in the world and somehow get back to the northern continent, I shouldn’t think the Antigeosians will be any too keen about building us another booster-rocket.”

“I guess not,” Paul agreed. “But maybe we’ll land on the other continent. And maybe the people there will do something for us.”

“Think so?” murmured Sam, sceptically. “Because I don’t. Dash it all, the one thing we know about those chaps is that they made Stewart McQuoid a prisoner.”

“That’s almost a point in their favour,” said Paul. “Shows a nice sense of values. People like McQuoid ought to be locked up. Besides, he probably murdered someone, just as he did before.”

“Perhaps,” said Sam, leaving him.

The *Skylark* was still gently swinging, and black shadows rocked and swayed across the bunkroom. The sunlight was

softening into pale gold, and when Paul next gazed down through the lucidex the cloudfields were perceptibly nearer. He searched anxiously for a rift in the clouds, for something that would tell him whether they were coming down on land or in the sea, but he had no luck. Far to the south he glimpsed a small dark object that might have been a mountain peak, but even this had disappeared when he looked for it a second time.

Then he noticed that moisture was condensing on that part of the hull that was turned from the sun. They were entering the cloudfield, and the sun's disc, seen through the darkening vapour, gradually became a deeper red until it was just a fiery shield hanging in the mist. Ice started to form on the hull, the frozen moisture traced intricate patterns on the lucidex and, in the sun's deepening fire the ice-crystals sparkled like clusters of brilliants.

The shadows grew grey and diffuse, and slowly spread over the whole of the bunkroom until they had smoothed out all the light there was into a dismal, dispiriting monochrome.

Paul leant out of his bunk and shouted up the communication shaft: "Lights!"

"No good," Sam shouted back. "The batteries came adrift when the rocket blew up. No heat, either, of course."

"I thought not," muttered Paul, and in fact, cold was creeping over him like a paralysis. He tucked the blankets round his legs and body, and buried his face in them until only his eyes and the top of his head were showing. He wondered how much longer the descent would take and, remembering how Pollenport had used the *Skylark's* motor to break the fall when they had first landed on Antigeos, listened for the sound of it starting up.

However, a moment's reflection blew that idea apart. Obviously, since the motor depended for its ignition upon electricity, it couldn't be started up, and Paul muttered to

himself: "Then I guess we'll land with one heiluva of a bump . . ." and he supposed that that would be so even if they came down on the sea. In that case, the impact would be less, of course, but it might still be violent enough to give them a shaking.

So much moisture had by now frozen to the hull that it was becoming difficult to see out. In places the ice was fissured by channels and cracks, and to get any idea of what was going on outside, Paul had to put his eye to the lucidex opposite one of these cracks. The spaceship was still falling through cloud, but the character of the mist was changing. Instead of hanging like a white pall of fog it was now heaving and swirling as if the clouds around them were being driven down the sky by a high wind, and Paul caught a glimpse of the parachute bellying and flapping like the mainsail of a ship in a gale. Scurries of sleet or snow lashed the hull, and the *Skylark* jerked and tugged at the cords as if protesting against the drag of the parachute.

For a second Paul thought he glimpsed heaving seas immediately below—certainly saw something that might have been a great wave white with broken wind-driven foam—and then he was thrown back on to the mattress by a change in the vessel's motion. At the same instant darkness swamped the bunkroom and his ears were assailed by a soft silken noise like far-distant thunder. It was his impression that the *Skylark* was still falling, and he asked himself desperately what was happening.

Then, with a strange grinding sound, all movement ceased, and in the absolute silence that followed he hastily loosened the straps around his chest and thighs, and climbed from the bunk. In utter darkness he groped for the rope ladder, and his heart was thumping so violently that every beat seemed to shake his whole body. . . .

THE darkness in the control compartment was just as impenetrable, and a great weight seemed to be settling upon the *Skylark*. The hull creaked faintly, and Pollenport struggled up from the mattress on which he'd been lying, but no sooner was he on his feet than he stumbled forward as violently as if he'd been pushed, and cannoned into the lucidex wall, bruising his shoulder.

"What the hell?" he muttered and, unable to regain his balance, fell heavily to the floor and lay there surrounded by the débris of crushed pumpkin plants. He spat out a mouthful of soil, and warned Sam. "Steady how you get up," he muttered. "The floor's sloping at one helluvan angle. I practically fell on my face."

However, Sam had discovered that the floor was sloping and, more cautious than Pollenport, he was crawling about on his hands and knees. "I'm trying to find a torch," he said, and his voice came from the direction of the control panel.

Paul was clambering up the communication-shaft. "What happened?" he asked.

"I don't know," Pollenport told him. "Stay where you are till Sam finds a torch."

"I've found one," said Sam and, as he spoke, a powerful beam of light struck through the darkness and swung round the compartment. It revealed Pollenport reclining amidst the broken foliage of the pumpkin plants and looking, in his Antigean tunic, like a reveller on the morning after a Dionysian orgy, and then the light fell on Paul's head and shoulders, visible above the mouth of the communication-shaft. Complete chaos had overtaken the compartment and everything movable had piled up in a heap at the floor's lowest point, near where Pollenport reclined.

"You hurt?" asked Sam.

"Well, not mortally," said Pollenport, groaning as he got to his knees. "And you, Paul? Are you all right?"

"Sure. I'm fine."

"Good. There's some brandy in the locker. I daresay we could all do with a nip."

Sam produced two more torches, and as soon as the three men had had swigs of brandy from the flask, they set about making an examination of the entire spaceship. They discovered that the hull was undamaged, the lucidex was intact and there was no sign of even the smallest crack, but beyond the lucidex there was nothing except the mysterious external darkness. There was not even a glimmer of light, there was only an impenetrable blackness, an inkiness that surrounded the *Skylark* on all sides, as well as above and below.

"Gee, it's odd," said Paul. "Jonah, shall we open up the exit hatch?"

"No," said Pollenport. "Not until we know more about our situation."

Sam returned just then—he had been examining the fuel tanks and storage compartments.

"Everything's all right round there," he told them. "The tanks aren't damaged and, though the stores have shifted a bit, it's not as bad as I'd expected. Let's have a look at the generator-room."

He opened the door as he spoke and at once they realised that it was here that the main damage had been done. Not only had all the accumulators broken loose from their moorings, but a large metal cabinet, packed with geological specimens, had careered across the compartment into the pedal generator, smashing the machine so badly that it looked like a bicycle that had been run over by a tank. The dynamo had come off more lightly, but it was clear that many hours' work would have to be put in before any power could be generated.

"And until it's mended, we're where Moses was—in the dark," muttered Sam. "What's the next step, Jonah?"

"A council of war," said Pollenport, and led the way back to the control compartment.

"Put out your torches," he said, as they settled themselves on the mattresses. "I know we've got plenty of spare batteries, but we've no idea of how long we shall have to live in this darkness. It could be for weeks."

"Blimey," said Sam, and switched out his torch. The darkness was then so absolute that it needed an effort of imagination for each of them to realise that he was still in the familiar control compartment and within arm's reach of his friends, and Paul was glad when he heard Pollenport's voice again.

"I don't know what you two think," said Pollenport, "but so far I've been visited by only one possible explanation of our predicament."

"Then you're 'way ahead of me," murmured Paul.

"Let's look at the facts," Pollenport went on. "At the moment of landing Sam and I could see practically nothing. Our impression was that of driving through a blizzard, then we felt a slight jolt and the *Skylark* was plunged into darkness. But, Paul, you think you saw a wave, and you believed we were coming down in the sea. All right, perhaps you did see a wave and I think it's possible that we're embedded in mud."

"Mud?" echoed Sam. "Well, that could be the explanation, couldn't it?"

"Yes," said Pollenport. "A river estuary—shallow water covering vast mud-flats—soft oozy mud with firmer mud beneath. Why, we'd plunge twenty or thirty feet into it, before we stuck, and then the liquid mud would close in over us. And that explanation would account for the vessel trembling a little when we move about."

"It certainly fits the facts," Sam agreed. "And if you're

right the next question is—how do we get unembedded?”

“Oughtn’t we first to open the exit hatch half an inch or so?” asked Paul. “Just to make sure Jonah’s right?”

“Yes, we’ll do that,” said Pollenport. “And one point in our favour is the time factor—there’s no breathless hurry. Even if the pumpkin plants die on us—and, deprived of daylight, they can hardly fail to—we’ve still got plenty of oxygen in the tanks. And food enough to last us for six months.”

The exit hatch was a small circular door let into the *Skylark’s* side just opposite the generator-room. Paul crawled into the shaft that led to the hatch and loosened the wing-nuts that secured it. Then, exerting what pressure he could in that cramped space, he tried to force the door open. It was stuck fast, and even when he wriggled into the shaft the other way on and kicked at the hatch, he couldn’t move it. Either it was jammed by a warping of the spaceship’s fabric or it was held fast by the pressure of the mud or whatever it was that gripped the *Skylark*.

“Maybe we could blow it open with a light charge of blasting-powder,” he said, but both Sam and Pollenport shook their heads.

“Too risky,” said Pollenport. “The blast might crack the lucidex, or we might find ourselves with mud pouring in through the hatch and no way of stopping it. No, I think the thing to do is to get the generator repaired and then reconsider our position. Perhaps someone will have a bright idea while we’re working. . . .”

IT had long been an article of faith with Sam that almost anything could be done by reaction-propulsion and now, as they sweated to get the generating-plant into order, he wondered how his favourite power could be utilised in extricating them from their strange and alarming situation.

"Jonah, when we've repaired the jenny," he said, "what do you suppose would happen if we started up the motor?"

Pollenport laughed. "At a guess—anything," he said. "We'd probably blow ourselves to glory."

"Think so?"

"That is, if anything happened at all. Personally, I rather doubt if you'd get the motor to start."

"Why not?"

"Because, if it's mud we're stuck in, it's probably choking the exhaust nozzle. Quite likely it's got into the combustion chamber as well."

Sam said nothing more, but it was quite obvious that he continued to ponder his idea. He was working on the dynamo while Paul and Pollenport hammered away at the twisted metal of the pedal generator, struggling to get it back into some sort of shape. The only light in the compartment was that afforded by torches fixed at various points with adhesive tape, and the criss-cross of the torches' beams compounded with the looming shadows of the men to produce a bizarre effect suggestive of a kobold's underground smithy. In that confined space the noise of the hammering was enough to deafen a man, and Paul wondered if it could possibly be audible outside. It might provide an unnerving experience for some unsuspecting Antigean if he were walking along the seashore and suddenly heard the sound of hammers on metal issuing from a mud bank.

It took them between eight and nine hours to get the generator into working order, and then they turned their

attention to the accumulators. These were in very bad shape, several had been completely smashed, and the salvaging of the others looked like being a long job.

"Shall we leave them for the time being," Sam suggested, "and have something to eat?"

"All right," said Pollenport. "Only it will mean doing without light or power for a bit longer. Unless one of us is prepared to ride the pedal generator all the time."

"Yes, but I'm starving," said Sam, and, in fact, they'd had nothing to eat or drink all day except a few biscuits and some tomato-juice.

"Well, you and Paul get a meal ready, and I'll ride the machine. Then you'll be able to boil a kettle."

"Good," said Sam, grinning. With Sam, a cup of tea ranked as a major necessity and, if only one could be had, he was prepared to tolerate life under almost any conditions.

Pollenport mounted the machine and started to pedal. The lights came on, and Sam and Paul went up to the control compartment.

Paul gazed out through the lucidex but the substance in which they were gripped pressed against the hull as impenetrably as ever. "I think we ought to try your plan," he said.

"You mean, start up the motor?"

"Yes."

"Well, we'll discuss it with Jonah when we've had something to eat. I can't think there'd be any particular risk in it, anyway."

They opened cans of soup, corned beef and fruit salad. Sam made a pot of tea, and then Pollenport joined them. The lights died away when he left the machine, and they had to eat their food by the light of torches.

Sam re-opened the question of starting up the motor, but Pollenport was still not in favour of it. "Let's take our time," he said. "First, let's get the accumulators mended,

then we can discuss possible methods of extricating ourselves."

The silence with which the other two greeted this was enough to tell him that this view wasn't popular.

"It looks as if I'm in a minority," he said, with a laugh. "Well, what exactly is your idea, Sam?"

"I've already told you. I simply want to start the motor. I'll be very gentle about it, and I think there's a good chance it will lift us free."

"I'd say we'd be more likely to turn over."

"Well, if that looks like happening, I can switch off."

"I see. But you won't have any ignition until we've fixed the accumulators."

"Someone can pedal."

"Yes," said Paul, "I will."

After a little more argument, Pollenport gave way. He had few hopes of the experiment, but felt it would be good for morale to try it. He had more nervous stamina than either of the others and, although he found the darkness and the strangeness oppressive, he could have tolerated them for weeks without breaking down; but Sam and Paul were already slightly dispirited. Each made some attempt to appear nonchalant, but Pollenport could detect signs of strain in the tones of their voices and even in their gestures.

"Like me to come with you?" he asked, as Paul got up and went towards the hatch that led to the generator-room.

"Thanks, I'll be all right," said Paul. "Sam may need you up here."

Sam was already at the control panel examining the instruments by the light of his torch. "I'll give you a shout before I switch on, Paul," he said.

"Right . . ."

In the lonely silence of the generator-room Paul almost wished he had accepted Pollenport's offer to keep him company. He could hear absolutely nothing from above

and although during the journey to Antigeos he had spent many hours alone in this compartment he had never felt as forlorn as he felt now. He strapped his torch to the handlebars of the pedal generator and started to whistle "Dinah" to keep his spirits up.

"Where shall I start from today?" he asked himself, as he got on to the saddle. "Marble Arch?"

Yes, Marble Arch would do as well as anywhere and, as he pretended to pedal briskly along the Bayswater Road, the lights in the compartment gradually came on; and by the time he reached Notting Hill Gate they were burning at full strength.

"Holland Park Avenue," he muttered, but already he was finding it difficult to keep his mind on his imaginary journey. Sam's being a helluva time," he reflected. "Surely there's nothing for him to do except switch on?"

Thoughts of what would happen to them if they never freed the *Skylark* kept thrusting themselves upon him, and he sweated with horror as he thought of the possibility of being imprisoned for months. "We'll go mad," he told himself, then abruptly checked the idea and forced his mind from such evil forebodings.

"Come on—concentrate," he adjured himself, between clenched teeth. "Now where've I got to? Beyond Shepherd's Bush, I guess. Okay, let's say Goldhawk Road. . . . Bear to the left now, towards Chiswick High Road—look out, mind that dog!" and he pretended to brake so realistically that the lights trembled and flickered.

This produced an immediate reaction from Sam. "Hey, Paul—keep it steady!" he shouted. "I'm just about to try er."

"Okay. Sorry. . . ."

He abandoned his cycle-ride and did all he could to keep his pedalling steady and even; and a little later there came a warning shout from above and he knew that Sam was

about to switch on. From the combustion chamber he heard a subdued roar, followed by a gentle rumbling, and he told himself that at least the gases had fired. Also he heard a noise of hissing, a hissing that grew ominously louder, and he grasped the handle-bars tightly, imagining that the sound might be the prelude to a vast, shattering explosion.

But for the moment anything in the nature of a catastrophe held off and the *Skylark*, instead of rising, seemed to settle more firmly into the substance that gripped her. The rumble from the combustion chamber increased as Sam opened the throttle and the sound of hissing began to reach the proportions of a roar.

Paul pedalled steadily on, and then became aware of a strange mutter of sound quite separate and distinct from the more immediate sounds connected with the motor. This new sound seemed to come from a long way away, and it had a brittle and metallic quality as if great sheets of glass were being torn apart between the hands of a giant; and the trembling of the *Skylark* became a shudder.

The noise of the motor stopped suddenly. Presumably Sam had heard the other sound and had switched off in alarm. The spaceship gave a wild terrifying lurch and Paul was thrown from the saddle. The lights faded into darkness at once, and, as Paul half-hurled himself and half-fell out of the generator-compartment, an external force struck the *Skylark* and the air was filled with an appalling crumbling roar as if hundreds of tons of masonry were falling from the sky. The force, whatever it was, seemed to be carrying the spaceship along with it, and Paul felt as if he were travelling in an express train that had taken leave of the rails and was careering downhill across ploughed fields and over hedges and ditches. He managed to get himself into the shaft that led to the control compartment, but once there found it impossible to climb. He dared not relax his grip for an instant, and simply clung there, bracing himself with hands

and feet on the rungs and his back against the wall of the shaft.

He had no idea of what was happening. Every few seconds there came a jolt that jarred every bone in his body and the *Skylark* seemed to be bounding about like a tennis-ball going over a cataract; and all this was accompanied by a steady thunderous roar that seemed to press down upon the *Skylark* from above.

Then suddenly, just as Paul was thinking he could stand no more of this treatment without being shaken to death, there came a change. The movement became less violent, and then the *Skylark* seemed to be half gliding, half rolling over a rough unstable surface, and Paul felt himself wheeling over and over as if he were braced against the sail of a wind-mill.

The noise was growing fainter. The worst of it seemed to have raced beyond the *Skylark* and Paul could hear it roaring and thundering in the distance like a cyclone that had dragged the spaceship along with it for some way and then had abandoned it. The *Skylark's* gyrations slowed down, and at last the vessel came to a standstill with a slight bump.

Paul was dazed and out of breath. Some seconds passed before he realised that he was no longer moving, and then he found that he was lying on his back, which meant that the *Skylark* had come to rest on its side. The darkness seemed as pervading as ever and no sound came from the control compartment; and as soon as Paul had got his breath back he struggled over on to his stomach and crawled painfully along the shaft.

"Jonah? . . . Sam?"

He was answered by a faint groan. It came from the darkness immediately beneath him, and he climbed out of the shaft, taking care not to lower himself on to either Pollenport or Sam. His feet sank ankle-deep into loose, crumbling

soil and he groped about him until his hand touched someone's bare arm.

It was Pollenport. Paul could tell that much from the tunic, and a moment later, while he was trying to locate Pollenport's pulse, he was relieved to hear his name whispered.

"Paul? Is that you?"

"It's me all right, Jonah. Are you badly hurt?"

"No . . . Find Sam."

Paul stumbled over a mattress and then found Sam lying on his face, huddled up with his knees touching his chest. Paul turned him over gently and was alarmed to feel blood trickling over his fingers. He tried to get his ear to the unconscious man's chest and in so doing found that Sam clutched a torch.

It still worked all right and Paul shone it into Sam's face. Blood was pouring from a gashed forehead, but when the light shone on his eyes the lids trembled and Paul murmured: "Anyway, he's alive."

It was impossible to get at the medicine locker. With the *Skylark* on its side, the floor of the control compartment had become a perpendicular plane and the lockers were at the top, but as Paul shone the torch round the compartment Sam suddenly came to and muttered something about wanting a cup of tea. He tried to struggle into a sitting position and Paul had to restrain him. "Take it easy, Sam," he said. "I'll get you something to drink as soon as I can."

Pollenport crawled to them and expertly ran his fingers over Sam's limbs and ribs.

"Nothing broken, as far as I can tell," he said. "My God, we've been lucky. Sam and I were hurled about like a couple of dice in a dice box."

"But, Jonah, what happened exactly?"

"God knows," said Pollenport. "And God knows where we are now." An idea seemed to strike him, and in an

altered tone he added: "Paul, put the torch out for a moment."

Paul did as he was asked, and after a few minutes it dawned on him that the darkness was not as absolute as he had imagined at first. Instead of being pitch-black, there was a greyness about it and just the faintest hint of reflected light.

"There, do you notice anything?" Pollenport asked.

"Well, it's not as dark as it was before we shifted."

"Exactly. In fact, it's no darker than it would be at home on a night when the moon is hidden by clouds, is it?"

"No, but——" Paul broke off as he realised what Pollenport was getting at and exclaimed: "Good Lord—do you think we're out in the open?"

"Yes, I do," said Pollenport, attempting to look out through the lucidex. But he could see nothing outside—either there was a thick fog or the lucidex was smeared and encrusted with mud.

Then he took the torch from Paul and examined Sam's cut forehead. "I don't think it'll be too bad when we get it cleaned up," he said. "See if you can get some water from somewhere, Paul."

Sam moaned a little as Pollenport probed the wound, and the pain seemed to bring him to himself. "The *Skylark*?" he murmured. "She stood up to it all right?"

"I think so."

"We're still on board her?"

"Yes . . ."

Paul came back along the shaft from the bunkroom with the emergency water-flask from over his bunk and Pollenport gave Sam a drink, then gently washed the blood and soil from his face. He bandaged the wound with a strip torn from his tunic and made Sam as comfortable as he could on one of the mattresses.

"I think we might as well get some sleep, too," he said to

Paul. "Obviously there's nothing much we can do before morning."

They found the second mattress and crawled on to it. Pollenport fell asleep almost at once, but Paul lay awake for hours, unable to sleep for excitement. He now felt certain that they were on the southern continent, and he tried to imagine what sort of creatures might inhabit this strange land that so far had had nothing to offer them except darkness. He knew no more about the southern continent than he had learnt by observation during the *Skylark's* journey towards Antigeeos—no more than that it was mountainous, fog-enshrouded and perhaps largely volcanic.

Presently, a wind came up. It howled and moaned around the spaceship, and the depth of the darkness in the compartment rose and fell as clouds raced across the moon. The last thing Paul remembered was gazing through the lucidex and finding that his view was still obscured by whatever it was that adhered to the spaceship's hull. . . .

(vi)

WHEN Paul awoke the next morning sunlight was streaming in through the lucidex, and, his first emotion was one of overwhelming relief. He felt as if he had just emerged from an eternity of darkness, and for some minutes he made no effort to move, but lay on his back stretching his limbs and enjoying the sun's warmth.

He sat up at last and gazed lazily about him. The lucidex was misty with condensation, and the outside of the hull seemed to be encrusted with a white substance that sparkled and glistened in the sunshine. Paul supposed it was salt and recalled the glimpse he had had of the sea's waves. He reflected that Pollenport's idea of the *Skylark* being

embedded in mud had probably not been far wrong. It also seemed plausible to suppose that Sam's experiment had blown them out of the mud, and then possibly the surf had caught them, carrying them to the shore where they were now stranded. Paul's thoughts went back to that unnerving experience of the night before, and he was glad to have found an explanation for it.

Pollenport, who was sharing the mattress with him, suddenly stirred in his sleep, gave a convulsive kick, then opened his eyes. "Dreaming," he muttered, apologetically, and Paul was shocked to see how terribly bruised and scratched were Pollenport's arms and face. All one side of his face was grazed and raw, and when he yawned Paul noticed that he had lost a front tooth, and remarked on it.

"Yes," grunted Pollenport. "And where the hell are my spectacles?"

He was practically blind without them, so Paul searched for them and presently excavated them, unbroken, from under the mattress. By then Pollenport had crawled across to Sam, who, still asleep, was breathing so feebly that for a moment it was doubtful whether he breathed at all.

"God, he's all right, isn't he?" Paul asked, anxiously.

"Yes," said Pollenport, with his fingers on Sam's pulse. "He's lost a lot of blood, but I don't think he's in any danger. We'll leave him to sleep and later we'll see what we can do about heating him some soup or something."

Paul didn't reply. He was staring in astonishment at the lucidex, amazed to see that what he had taken for salt was gradually melting away under the rays of the sun.

"Good Lord, Jonah, it's ice!" he exclaimed. "Where the hell are we?"

He wiped the sweating lucidex with his arm and gazed out. "Mountains!" he muttered, and stared dumbfounded at the vast panorama that stretched out before him. He had said "Mountains", yet the range of towering objects that

reared themselves against the morning sky were unlike any terrestrial mountains, except for the snow at their summits. They were simply gigantic blocks and slabs of rock impacting against each other at all angles, as black as pitch and tens of thousands of feet high. They had a dreadful sinister grandeur and everything about them suggested that they were the ruins and débris of some appalling, primeval cataclysm.

"Basalt," murmured Pollenport. "There must have been quite a party here some time in the last ten million years."

"Yes," said Paul, and felt that he'd seen enough of that forbidding horizon. He shifted his gaze and saw that closer at hand—in fact, immediately beneath them—there was a broad irregular valley. A river ran through the valley, and all along the banks of the river were wide patches of brownish-green vegetation, so evenly spaced and arranged that they could hardly be anything other than crops of some sort.

"It certainly looks as if these parts are inhabited——" he began, then suddenly broke off and clutched Pollenport's arm. "Jesus!" he breathed.

"What's wrong?"

"Hell, don't you see where we are? We're within about a foot of the edge!"

He was right. The *Skylark* was resting on a narrow shelf of rock over a precipice. There were hardly more than a dozen inches between it and a drop of perhaps three thousand feet into the valley.

"Uh—huh, let's get out of here," Paul muttered. "And to think there was a wind in the night! I'd never have slept if I'd known about this."

Pollenport was unperturbed. "A wind, was there?" he said. "Well, if we were going to shift we'd have shifted then. So we've nothing to worry about."

"But, Jonah, we don't know which way the wind was

blowing. Maybe it was holding us on. Now it's dropped, anything can happen."

However, Pollenport decided that the *Skylark's* position was not as precarious as it looked, and pointed out that the reaction motor and the weightier parts of the spaceship were behind them. "They'll hold us in place," he said. "And now let's see what we can do about getting to the water-tanks. I'm thirsty."

Paul glanced towards the mouth of the shaft that led to the tanks and storage compartments. "It would be quite a job to climb up there," he said. "I think we'd do better to crawl along to the bunkroom and then get into the other shaft from there, where there's a rope ladder to help us."

"All right," said Pollenport, and wriggled feet-first into the nearer shaft, which, with the *Skylark* on her side, was now a tunnel. Paul followed him and a moment later heard Pollenport say, as he came abreast of the entrance to the generator-room: "I'm afraid all our work's gone for nothing. The accumulators have crashed into the jenny and smashed it again."

"Hell," muttered Paul, but actually he was more interested in the exit hatch. He could see it at the end of its short tunnel and it looked as if the *Skylark* was practically resting on it.

"This isn't so good," he remarked. "The part of the *Skylark* that's to the ground is the part with the exit hatch in it. If we try to blast the hatch off, we'll blast ourselves over the cliff."

Pollenport was still wriggling his way along the shaft, and had nearly reached the bunkroom. "In that case," he said, "we'll just have to hack our way out through the lucidex."

"It would take a week or more!"

"Easily. But we're in no particular hurry."

"I am," said Paul, with a laugh. "Every second I

spend perched over this precipice adds to my worries.”

He clambered into the bunkroom in Pollenport's wake and found that his chief was drinking from an emergency water-flask that he had taken from one of the bunks.

“It was snow, of course,” Pollenport murmured, as he handed Paul the flask.

“What was snow?”

“Why, it was snow that we fell into. The *Skylark* must have buried herself in it somewhere near the top of this mountain we're on, and as we dropped you must have mistaken a ridge of snow for a wave. And then when Sam started up the motor he created a minor avalanche which carried us down the mountainside until we either rolled or were thrown clear.”

This explanation was more or less confirmed when, a few minutes later, they reached the storage compartments and could see about them through the lucidex. The summit of a squat, block-like mountain towered above them, and towards it led a gully down which the avalanche must have roared. The *Skylark* was jammed against some boulders on the cliff's edge, and part of the torrent of snow must have continued on its way down the gully, while the rest of it had hurtled over the precipice into the valley below.

“We certainly get plenty of both sorts of luck,” Paul remarked, and then started to search among the heap of burst ration-cartons for something that would do for breakfast. He had just found two cans of pineapple-cubes when Pollenport suddenly exclaimed: “Paul, come and see what's happening in the valley!”

He was clinging to the rails of the little gantry that ran between the fuel tanks and the lucidex, and Paul joined him. At first glance the valley looked much as it had looked earlier that morning and it was a minute or two before Paul realised that it was no longer deserted. Several paths led from the surrounding mountains to the patches of vegetation

by the river and along these paths great numbers of dark-coloured man-like creatures were advancing in single file. At that distance, it was impossible to distinguish any details or even, with no reliable scale of comparison, to get any clear idea of the creatures' size, but it was Paul's impression that they were about as large as human beings; and that they walked upright was evident from the long shadows thrown by the early morning sun.

"I'm going to have a shot at finding my field-glasses," said Pollenport, and was about to move from the gantry when Paul stopped him.

"No, don't go, Jonah. I think they've seen us!"

All movement along one of the main paths was coming to a standstill. The creatures were starting to bunch together in little knots; waving their arms excitedly and gazing up at the spaceship. In a matter of minutes the same excitement had infected all the paths, and slowly the groups grew larger as the creatures were joined by their fellows still coming from the direction of the mountains.

"God, there must be thousands of them," said Paul.

"Yes, and I've just seen something else," said Pollenport, and pointed to the far end of the valley. "Can you see some sort of white animal moving there in the distance?"

"An animal?" Paul murmured, shading his eyes. "Why, yes, I can see it. It looks almost like a horse."

"I don't know," said Pollenport, doubtfully, and squinted into the sunlight, "but anyway, it's coming in this direction, and it's my impression that it's got a rider. If so, these people must have markedly different ideas from the other Antigeosians."

The inhabitants of the northern continent had had no beasts of burden. Their civilisation's early development of mechanical power had enabled them to dispense with anything in the nature of horses or oxen and in any case the idea of using animals to fetch and carry for them would have

conflicted with their innate respect for the dignity of life in any form. In fact when on one occasion Pollenport had mentioned our use of horses, his Antigean friends had been so shocked that he had had to pretend he was talking of historical things.

But apparently the people of this continent had no such inhibitions. The animal that was prancing along the valley bottom was nearer now and Pollenport and Paul could see that undoubtedly it was being ridden. They could distinguish the rider as a dark solid figure perched well forward, astride the beast's withers. The terrain over which the animal was galloping was rugged and sloping, and at every moment Paul expected it to stumble and throw its rider.

"It doesn't move like a horse," he observed.

"No, I'm inclined to think it's some sort of mountain animal."

The creatures on the paths seemed to be in fear of the rider, and as soon as they caught sight of him they started to scatter, most of them pressing on towards the vegetation patches at the riverside. A few, however, refused to panic and stood their ground even when the rider charged in amongst them, with his left arm flailing wildly.

"My God, he's using a whip!" Paul exclaimed. "Those poor devils must be slaves or something of the sort."

The creatures nearest the rider cowered away from him, but at the same time pointed frantically towards the *Skylark*, and apparently succeeded in diverting the rider's attention to the spaceship, for he drew rein and gazed upwards.

"He's seen us," said Pollenport, and by now every one of the creatures in the valley was staring up at the *Skylark*. Hundreds of them were standing knee-deep in the crops by the river, shading their eyes, and making no effort to do any work. A steamy vapour hung over the vegetation and Paul noticed that it was rapidly becoming denser.

"There's a mist coming up," he muttered.

"Yes," said Pollenport. "This part of Antigeos certainly has a most unenviable climate."

The mist was rolling along the valley like smoke—a thick white mist that smoothed everything into an exasperating non-committal blank. It engulfed the river, and then spread outwards towards the mountains, hiding the slaves and their overseer just when Paul was wondering what their next step would be.

"Do you think they'll come up here?" he asked.

"Sure to, if it's possible," said Pollenport, starting to move away. "Come on—we'd better get back to Sam. . . ."

(vii)

THE *Skylark*, grounded and tilting, made a far from ideal habitation. It had never been designed as living quarters for a crew that had the force of gravity to contend with, and now even to move about in it was a problem. It was hopeless, with the vessel on its side, to try and get the generating plant into order, which meant that the crew were deprived of heat and power, and a small solid fuel stove was the only means they had of heating food. The condensation plant, only designed to operate in the ultimate void, was useless in the present circumstances, and already every surface was sweating and beaded with moisture. Outside the spaceship the mist rose steadily until presently even the nearest rocks were invisible, and the sun itself was veiled.

Pollenport and Paul worked hard to make the control compartment habitable. They swept all the soil into the angle formed by the lucidex and the floor of the compartment, levelled it and covered it with mattresses dragged up from the bunkroom. Then Paul climbed into the storage compartment and lowered three days' supply of canned food

and a five-gallon keg of water to Pollenport below; and already they were breathing a mixture of oxygen and helium from the emergency supply tank, with the result that their voices were a few tones higher than usual.

Sam woke up during these activities, but he was obviously too weak and dazed to help. Pollenport gave him some soup and chocolate, and told him of what they had seen in the valley.

"You might have woken me," said Sam querulously. "What's going on now?"

Pollenport explained that they were making preparations for a few days' more life on board the *Skylark*, and Sam wriggled impatiently. "What's the point of it, Jonah?" he asked. "Let's blast the exit hatch off and get away."

"We can't," said Pollenport. "The *Skylark* is practically resting on the hatch, so our only chance is to hack our way out through the lucidex—and that, of course, will take days. Besides, we'd better find out something about the disposition of the natives before we venture among them."

Sam sighed fretfully and gazed about him. It distressed him to see his beloved *Skylark* in her present bedraggled condition, and his desire to get away from her as soon as possible was understandable.

Paul returned to the control compartment carrying a hammer and cold chisel. "Where are we going to make this hole?" he asked.

"That needs some thought," said Pollenport. "The *Skylark* may shift a bit under the action of repeated blows and it'd be too bad for us if she shifted the wrong way. Sit down and let's discuss it."

Paul dropped the hammer and chisel on to a mattress and was just about to sit down when he caught sight of something through the lucidex that shocked him so horribly that for a moment he was unable to speak.

"What's wrong?" asked Pollenport.

"My God, Jonah—behind you!" cried Paul, and pointed.

Pollenport swung round and found himself confronted by a thin, narrow, slate-coloured face—the face of an animal possessing all the features of a human being, but in repulsive travesty. A long bony nose was pressing against the lucidex, and the creature was clawing at the *Skylark's* hull with torn and gnarled fingers. The huge whiteless eyes stared at Pollenport with a weird and inexplicable eagerness, and he noticed that, except for a single ragged garment like a sack with holes cut for head and arms, the creature was naked; and in common with the Antigeosians on the other continent, it had antennæ, but these were so short and stumpy as to be almost rudimentary.

Sam's curiosity overcame his feebleness and he raised himself on an elbow. "What the deuce is that thing on its head?" he asked.

"Don't know," said Pollenport. "It looks like a sort of branks."

The device they were talking about consisted of two metal bands, one of which went round the creature's cranium at the level of its forehead, while the other passed under its chin and over the top of its head, crossing the first in the region of the temples; and a slight bulging of the flesh at the edges of the metal indicated that the bands were fastened tightly in place.

Three more figures loomed like grey ghosts out of the mist and flattened their faces against the lucidex with the same strange eagerness as the first, and a striking thing about the four creatures was their similarity—they were as alike as four sheep.

Sam found their unwavering gaze a little disconcerting. "They look a bad-tempered bunch," he said.

"Yeah, and I guess we'd be bad-tempered," Paul murmured, "if we had to go around with our faces in clamps all the time."

Pollenport had his notebook out and was making hurried notes. "Faces almost hairless," he wrote. "No eyelashes or eyebrows, a few long strands of lank hair on heads. Height approx. five feet, bodies emaciated and rachitic. Slit-like lipless mouths set in grim obstinate lines. Round eyes with grey lustreless irises. Hands much like human hands except for placing of pollex—doubt if opposable. . . ."

"'And thick and fast, they came at last,'" muttered Paul, and Pollenport glanced up to see dozens of the creatures milling about in the mist, all struggling to get to the *Skylark*; and, as this was taking place within a few feet of the cliff's edge, at every moment it seemed likely that one or another of the Antigiosians would be pushed over.

Only one of the creatures differed in any way from the others, and he stood on a ledge of rock a little to one side, looking anxious and harassed. He appeared to be cleaner and better-nourished than the rest and, although his tunic was just as coarse and sack-like, it was in fairly good repair, and round his waist he wore a narrow belt of brown fur.

"You notice he hasn't got one of those clamps on his head?" said Paul, peering through the mist. "I think he must be a foreman or something."

"It looks like it," Pollenport agreed, and now the creature on the rock was gesturing agitatedly with his hands, as if to call the others away, and the nature of his gesticulations confirmed what Pollenport had already suspected—that these Antigiosians also communicated with each other by movement rather than by sound.

The creatures round the spaceship were still fighting among themselves like pigs at a trough, and they took no notice at all of the foreman's frantic gestures. They were interested only in the *Skylark* and, more particularly, in Pollenport, and their deep-set stony eyes gazed at him so beseechingly and with such yearning that he felt they would haunt him for as long as he lived.

In despair, the foreman gave up all attempt at control. He dropped his hands and at the same moment his attention was taken up by something that was happening farther down the gully, out of sight of the space-travellers. He stiffened apprehensively, then lowered his head and threw his forearm across his eyes.

"What's that in aid of?" asked Sam.

"The boss," Paul suggested, and as he spoke he caught a glimpse of something whiter than the mist that hid it, and guessed it was the prancing animal that they had seen earlier in the valley.

The foreman ran forward into the mist, presumably to help the rider dismount, and Pollenport did all he could to indicate to his wretched admirers that there was trouble in the offing. He leant against the lucidex and pointed vigorously in the direction of the white animal, but his gestures and his proximity simply served to excite his worshippers to a greater frenzy than ever. They started leaping about like maniacs, hurled themselves against the hull and scrabbled desperately at the lucidex as if to tear their way through it. The whole spaceship trembled under the violence of their assault and Paul muttered urgently: "For Chri' sake! They'll have us over. . . ."

Then out of the mist there loomed a huge dark figure. "Yes, this is the boss all right," said Paul, and as the dismounted rider came nearer—taking up a position on the ledge of rock where the foreman had stood—they could see that he was dressed in black fur robes that completely covered him from head to foot. His face was hidden by a fur vizor attached to his high conical hat, and there were holes in the vizor for his eyes and antennæ.

For more than a minute he stood there absolutely motionless, an imposing and threatening figure. He looked almost half as tall again as the foreman, who was hovering uneasily behind him, and his robes, exaggerated at the shoulders and

flaring out into a full, divided skirt, were certainly designed to emphasise his might and authority. His hands were hidden in gauntleted, fingerless gloves, and in his left hand he held a thin rod of flexible steel about four feet long and fitted with a handle like a rapier.

Pollenport studied this forbidding and sinister figure through field-glasses and was relieved to find at least one detail suggesting there might be elements in this civilisation that were not as debased and brutal as everything they had seen so far. This single detail was the man's belt, which appeared to be made of silver, elaborately chased and set with jewels, and Pollenport was amazed to see how fine was the workmanship of it. Certain motifs in its design reminded him of North Antigeon art-forms and he wondered if, after all, there might not have been communication between the two continents at some remote period.

"He's got something fastened to his belt," said Paul. "What is it, Jonah?"

Pollenport shifted the glasses slightly. "It's a sort of pouch," he said. "It looks as if it's made of net with a fairly fine mesh, and inside it there are a dozen or so small white round objects. They could almost be golf balls, though I daresay it's unlikely."

Suddenly the befurred figure moved. He threw up an arm and ferociously cut the air several times with the steel rod, then put his head back and bayed in a voice loud enough to be heard even inside the control compartment: "Yuh! Yuh! Yuh! . . ." and his breath on the cold air poured out at the sides of the vizor like a dragon's smoke and melted into the mist.

"So these fellows also have a few spoken words," said Pollenport.

"If you can call it a word," murmured Paul.

An ominous stillness came over the huddle of creatures pressing against the *Skylark's* hull. One or two covered

their eyes with their forearms, just as the foreman had done and slunk off into the mist, not dropping their arms until they were well behind the overseer. The others simply froze, and in their faces Pollenport could see the conflict that raged between their terror of the overseer and their reluctance to move away from the spaceship.

Then the overseer took three deliberate steps forward, and that was enough. The slaves lost their nerve and broke away, shoving and jostling each other in their efforts to escape the wrath of their master, yet not forgetting to hide their eyes as they passed him; and in a matter of seconds they were gone.

All except one—the one who had got to the *Skylark* first. He still stood with his face pressed to the lucidex, staring from unseeing eyes and lost in some remote unimaginable ecstasy. The overseer towered over him, silent now and baneful, and Pollenport did his frantic best to bring the wretched slave to his senses, slapped and hammered on the lucidex directly opposite the man's eyes, but it was no use—the fellow might have been a transfixed corpse for all the notice he took.

The monstrous overseer moved a step nearer and his gloved hand, trembling with anger, slowly raised the iron rod. For nearly a minute he stood over the slave, with the rod behind his head and his feet planted well apart, then suddenly struck, slashing at the slave's head with all his strength.

The rod crashed against the clamps that gripped the man's face, striking red sparks from the metal, and the pain of the blow stretched the thin lips back to disclose huge teeth as ridged and as brown as acorns. The slave reeled back from the lucidex with blood gushing from a deep cut in his cheek, and before he could recover himself the overseer struck a second blow as ferocious as the first.

Still the man didn't go down, and it occurred to Pollen-

port that no human being could have sustained two such tremendous blows and yet be on his feet. The slave struggled to get away, and staggered towards the overseer, too dazed to cover his eyes or to know what he was doing, and his insolence was punished with a blow that would have smashed his skull but for the iron band that crossed his head.

As it was, he doubled up under the blow and veered away towards the cliff's edge. The overseer hit him once more, a light smart blow that caught the man on the nape of his neck and the three space-travellers were horrified to see him lurch forward, then topple over the precipice. His hands shot out clutching the air, there was a faint scream and then nothing except a grey spread-eagled shape fading into the depths of the mist.

Paul muttered: "God . . ." under his breath, and felt the blood drain from his face. Pollenport was as white as chalk, and Sam turned from the lucidex and went back to his mattress.

"I've had as much as I can take of that character," he observed. "In fact, I think I'm going to be sick."

Now that the slave was out of the way, the overseer turned his attention to the *Skylark* itself. He strode forward out of the mist and, leaning against the hull, peered into the spaceship's interior. Pollenport moved round a little until he was able to gaze directly into the monster's eyes, and as soon as he saw them he exclaimed: "Good Lord—an albino!"

There could be no doubt about it. The eyes that stared at him from above the vizor's flattened fur were as pink as a white rat's—pink from the blood showing through their unpigmented irises—and they were fringed with eyelashes paler than straw; and in that particular setting, peering through slits cut in the black fur, they looked peculiarly dreadful. . . .

PAUL knew for a certainty that he would remember the strangeness of that morning for ever. It was the sense of incarceration that most affected him, and all other impressions were smothered beneath his awareness of the factors confining him and his companions to the spaceship—the lucidex walls, the mist and, beyond the mist, the great mountain barriers. He had been all for making an immediate attack upon the lucidex after the overseer's departure, but Pollenport had restrained him, and now he sat on a mattress moodily filing the cold chisel's cutting edge. Pollenport, in counselling patience, had pointed out that so far they knew almost nothing of the native's attitude to them—the attitude, that is to say, of the ruling caste, of which, presumably, the befurred albino was a representative.

"He certainly gave little impression of warm-hearted friendliness," Pollenport had said, "and we can't tell what he'd do if he discovered we were trying to get out of the *Skylark*. So, at least let's wait until it's dark."

An hour had passed since that conversation, and in the meantime they had seen no more of the natives than occasional grey shadows moving in the fog-filled gully. Yet it was certain that something was afoot, and from lower down the mountain they heard faint sounds—the clink of metal on rock and, every now and then, a rumbling crash as if a boulder had been rolled into the valley below.

Sam had gone back to sleep. For a time Pollenport leant against the lucidex and tried to make out what was going on down the gully, but presently he grew bored and came and sat on the end of Paul's mattress.

"We going to make a start?" Paul asked hopefully, and grabbed the hammer.

Pollenport shook his head and laughed. "I thought we'd

already discussed the matter," he murmured. "And decided against it."

"Well, yes, but it's just occurred to me that that overseer can hardly have looked upon us as out-and-out enemies or he wouldn't have had much compunction about having us shoved over the cliff. He didn't do that, so I guess maybe we haven't much to fear from him for the time being."

"I'm not so sure," said Pollenport. "I think he hates and fears us—fears us for the effect we have on the slaves, and I feel pretty sure that, if he could isolate us and dispose of us quietly, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment. I honestly don't think we should make any move to leave the *Skylark*. At least, not yet. Let's wait and see what happens."

"Anyway, I don't see why the slaves got so excited," said Paul. "We can't mean much to them."

"I'm not so sure. There was quite definitely a religious quality about their excitement, and I think it's possible that they look upon us as deliverers sent from Heaven to release them from their slavery. Or something of that sort."

"Then they must be a whole lot different from the North Antigeosians. Those boys haven't a clue when it comes to religion."

"No, but they're a happy people and when people are happy they're usually too busy getting the most out of the present life to worry overmuch about the next. Religion is the solace of the frightened and oppressed, and it's those whose hopes for this world are practically extinguished that set most store by the after-life; and, in consequence, slavery is one of the great begetters of religion. Judaism was a product of the bondage in Egypt, and it was among the slaves of the Roman Empire that Christianity first became a force to be reckoned with. However, in all this I must admit I'm making a large and fairly unwarranted assumption—that the actions and reactions of these creatures are more or less comparable to those of human beings."

"Yes," said Paul, and then noticed that Sam was awake. "Anything you want, Sam?" he asked.

"No, thanks—I'm feeling a lot better. In fact, I'm going to get washed and shaved. What's been happening while I've been asleep?"

"Nothing. We've just been nattering, and waiting for the next trick."

Sam sat up and yawned elaborately, then rose and went across to a camp washstand that had been rigged up in one corner of their inconvenient quarters.

Paul was silent and thoughtful for some minutes, re-considering the morning's events in the light of what Pollenport had been saying, and presently he remarked: "Those slaves didn't go much for Sam and me. They only seemed interested in you, Jonah. Why do you think that was?"

Jonah glanced up from his notebook. "Oh, I don't know," he murmured, with a shrug. "A religion implies prophets, and possibly something about me happened to coincide with some prophecy or other. The slaves may have a tradition that their saviour is to take the form of a being with thick black hair and a tendency to *embonpoint*."

"Tendency!" echoed Paul, grinning. "Anyway, I guess they were puzzled by your lack of antennæ——"

He was interrupted by an exclamation from the direction of the washstand, and he looked up to see Sam pointing through the lucidex with his shaving brush.

"Old Furry's come back," he said. "And he's got another chap with him. A different sort of chap."

Pollenport and Paul scrambled to their feet and joined Sam by the lucidex wall. The befurred overseer was standing some way back from the spaceship, ghostly in the mist, and at his side was another man. At that distance the newcomer's most striking feature was an extraordinary hat and, although for the moment its exact shape was indefinable, it

appeared to be at least twice as large as a normal hat, dark in colour and worn slightly to the back of the head, presumably to keep it out of the way of its wearer's antennæ. The man beneath the hat seemed to be neither a slave nor one of the overseer's kind. His face wasn't covered and he carried no steel whip, but there was nothing servile about him, and he looked directly at the overseer while talking to him with his hands.

"He's talking about the *Skylark*," said Sam, with a hint of self-satisfaction. "That's the third time he's pointed to it."

In fact, the man in the hat was doing more than merely point to the spaceship. His wide sweeping gestures seemed to indicate that he had some particular plan in mind, and Paul remarked: "I think he's figuring on moving us. Jeess, let's hope they're not aiming to roll us down the gully!"

The two men started to stroll towards the *Skylark*, and now the space-travellers could see that the newcomer was less massively built than the overseer and, although he looked nearly as tall, part of his height was due to his curious hat. He was still gesturing excitedly and the overseer's share in the conversation was limited to occasional laconic movements of one gloved hand.

"I'm surprised he can make himself understood with gloves on," said Sam. "I suppose it's a bit like speaking with your mouth full."

The Antigeosians came to within a few yards of the *Skylark*, close enough for the man in the hat to be studied in detail. He was not wearing furs, but his clothes followed the general pattern of the overseer's in that they had full skirts and wide sleeves, and were belted at the waist. Pollenport remarked that the material looked like a heavy felt, and it was dyed deep blue and embroidered down the front and round the hem. The hat, seen close to, was a quite incredible structure consisting of a broad thick brim surmounted by a

square crown that was broader at the top than at the bottom. It was not an easy hat to take seriously and Pollenport reflected that the only time he had ever seen anything like it on earth was in Van Eyck's portrait of the Arnolfini.

Paul had already recovered from the shock of the hat and was studying the man's face. "He looks quite like a North Antigeosian," he remarked, and Pollenport, after a minute's scrutiny, agreed that there was a likeness, but whereas one of the notable things about the northerners was their cheerfulness this man's expression was resigned and serious, as if his entire life had been one of sadness and frustration. And there were other differences. His complexion was paler, for one thing, and his round eyes, light green in colour, were as lustreless as pebbles.

The overseer evidently wasn't much interested in what his companion was saying. Although his face was invisible, his restlessness was enough to suggest he was bored and impatient and presently he glanced away into the mist and shouted: "Yuh . . ." accompanying the word with a peremptory gesture.

"I suppose he's calling for his steed," said Sam, and this surmise was proved right almost at once when the slave-foreman appeared, leading the strange white animal by its bridle.

This was the first chance the space-travellers had had of examining the overseer's mount at close quarters, and they were amazed that an animal looking so frail and built so sparsely could be used as a beast of burden. According to Pollenport, it was more like a gigantic Nubian goat than any other terrestrial animal, and its thin legs looked hardly strong enough to support its own weight, let alone that of a rider as well, and no doubt the secret of its strength lay partly in the fact that its legs were set obliquely to its narrow body, splaying outwards.

"Yes, a Nubian goat," repeated Pollenport, in spite of the

animal being nearly as large as a pony. "It has the same drooping ears, the same aristocratic nose and the same abstracted look about the eyes." The animal was hornless, but its long curved antennæ could easily have been mistaken for horns.

Pollenport took particular interest in the harness, hoping for further evidence as to the state of this strange civilisation, and he noticed that the broad straps of the bitless bridle were decorated with designs similar to those on the overseer's belt. The saddle, however, was quite plain and unremarkable—little more than a thick blanket of red felt thrown across the beast's withers and held in place by two girths, one going round the animal's chest just in front of its forelegs, while the other passed under its belly. There were no stirrups as such, but the rider could rest his feet in two loops of leather sewn to the front girth.

"Those designs on the bridle," said Paul. "Do you see how they sort of repeat themselves?"

"Yes, and they're very like those on the overseer's belt."

"Well, I think they're hieroglyphics."

"A written language?" murmured Pollenport, considering the idea. "Yes, they could be. I suppose these people aren't more than three or four thousand years behind us, in which case it's most likely that they have developed some system of writing."

The slave-foreman helped the overseer mount, then stood back with his eyes covered, until his master had vanished into the mist. Then, dropping his arm, he turned and faced the other Antigean, and the fact that he had no longer to keep his eyes covered suggested that the man in the hat was of a distinctly lower caste than the overseer.

"Maybe this part of the continent is inhabited by three or more different kinds of people," Paul remarked. "I mean, peoples as different as, say, Chinese, Europeans and Negroes."

"Possibly," said Pollenport. "Or perhaps the varieties are even more different than that. After all, the people on our earth are at least all of one species and all capable of the same levels of culture, but it might not have been so. I can imagine circumstances in which two or even three different species of man could have survived."

The man in the hat and the slave-foreman were now talking animatedly in gestures, proving that anyway they had a common language, and they seemed to be on excellent terms. Once during the conversation they gave the impression that they were discussing the overseer—at least, they glanced in the direction he had taken—and their expressions varied between nervous hatred on the foreman's part and withering contempt on the other's. Then they returned their attention to the *Skylark*, and this time their movements and gestures left no doubt in Pollenport's mind of their intention to move the spaceship. "I hope they realise we're not indestructible," he murmured. . . .

The Antigeosians went away presently and during the next part of the day the fog grew so dense that it became impossible to see anything except the nearest boulders. A dismal greyness tinged the daylight, and Pollenport and Paul sought to keep depression at bay by setting up the chess-board and starting a game, while Sam lay on his mattress pondering a problem that was already obsessing him—the problem of how to build another spaceship and get them all back to the earth. The future might be unimaginable, but nothing could shake his faith in reaction-propulsion, and he was convinced that somehow or other circumstances could be produced in which the construction of another spaceship would become practicable.

Outside, the sounds of activity continued relentlessly, and Pollenport, in the intervals of concentration on chess, gained the impression that more and more creatures were being called in to help with the work of clearing the gully.

The rumble of boulders rolling and crashing into the valley became more frequent, and now the noises came from closer at hand. The sense of complete isolation was oppressive, and it was difficult not to feel disturbed by the thought of legions of strange creatures preparing to drag the *Skylark* to an unknown destination, but escape was out of the question, and there was nothing to be done about it. "We must resign ourselves to the inevitable," murmured Pollenport, smiling, and his thoughts went back to the problem of a hemmed-in rook. . . .

(ix)

IT was still almost dark when Paul woke up the next morning, and at first he couldn't understand why he had awakened so early. Then he remembered that he had gone to bed unusually early the night before. With the generating-plant out of action they had had no electric light, and Pollenport and he had had to abandon their chess when they could no longer see the pieces. Pollenport had read for a while by the light of a torch, but Paul had gone to sleep right away.

He turned over on his back and drowsily recalled other events of the previous day, and thought about the slaves and the overseer, and the man in the hat. The slaves had gone on working well into the dusk, and for the final hour or so there had been a lot of hammering out there in the mist, and grating, rumbling sounds as if heavy objects were being dragged up the gully. "I suppose they're building some sort of contrivance to get us down the mountain," Sam had said. . . .

Presently Paul yawned and raised himself on an elbow. The others were still sound asleep and, moving stealthily,

he got up and crept across to the washstand. He sponged his face and arms and, while doing so, gazed through the lucidex.

The mist had cleared during the night. The valley was still a vast lake of darkness, but in the east the sky was streaked with pale strands of light, and Paul could just distinguish the outlines of the basalt mountains, black and sinister against the distant horizon.

He finished his toilet and went up to the storage compartment, taking with him a blanket and a packet of biscuits. He made his way to the little gantry by the fuel tanks, wrapped the blanket round him and settled himself with his back to the rails. This was the highest point he could reach, and he was waiting for the sun to rise. If the previous morning's sequence of events repeated itself—the dawn, then an hour or so of brilliant sunshine, followed by impenetrable mist—he would at least, during the interval of visibility, see something of this mysterious land.

It was cold up there on the gantry, and the lucidex was rimed with frost. Paul shivered and drew the blanket closer about him. He ate a biscuit to keep his teeth from chattering, and gazed steadily towards the east. Slowly the sky in that direction grew lighter, the stars vanished one by one, and a deep ruby glow flooded the underside of the single ridge of clouds. The sun, as yet still hidden, was rising with a slow majesty that seemed almost pretentious—as if it had never staged this performance before and would never stage it again.

Then Paul's attention was distracted by a sudden faint sound close at hand and, startled, he peered down into the darkness below. At first he could distinguish nothing except the vague outlines of boulders and he was beginning to think that his ears had deceived him when unmistakably a shadow moved. A moment later he saw three or four crouching figures steal noiselessly towards the spaceship.

He leant forward and wiped the lucidex with a corner of the blanket. There was more light now and he could just make out the forms of the creatures as they pressed themselves against the hull and gazed raptly into the darkness of the control compartment. Undoubtedly they were some of the slaves and Paul reflected that they were up and about considerably earlier than they had been the day before. Or had they spent the night on the mountain, keeping some kind of vigil at the *Skylark's* shrine?

Behind him Paul heard muffled scraping noises as someone wriggled his way along the communication-shaft, and knew that he was about to be joined by either Pollenport or Sam.

In fact, it was Pollenport, and now he whispered urgently: "Paul! Come and give me a hand, will you? I think I'm stuck."

Paul grinned and was about to go to the rescue when Pollenport spoke again. "No, it's all right," he said, "I'm managing. In fact, I'm out."

He was panting as he came to the gantry, and Paul shifted along to make room for him. "You'll have to reduce," he murmured.

"Oh, it wasn't that," said Pollenport. "My damned tunic got caught on something."

"Is Sam still asleep?"

"Yes. And I guessed I'd find you up here."

Paul pointed through the lucidex. "Your disciples are back," he said.

"The slaves?" muttered Pollenport, gazing down.

"Yes. Four or five of them."

"Now there's devotion for you!" said Pollenport, faintly complacent. "I suppose they've come up in advance of the others, just to pay their respects?"

"Maybe. Or maybe they've been out there all night."

"Surely not. Why, the poor wretches would have frozen to death."

"I shouldn't say they'd be easy to freeze," murmured Paul. "They look a hard-bitten bunch to me."

It was almost daylight. The snow-drifts covering the mountains' slopes above the *Skylark* were gleaming pinkly with light from the rising sun, and now the only remnants of the night were the pools of darkness stagnating in the valley's depths and the black shadows that still filled the gully.

Paul looked towards those shadows and tried to make out what it was the slaves had been building the day before. All he could see, even as the light grew stronger, was a confused pattern of objects that might have been logs laid crosswise on each other, forming a huge raft or shed, with all its front part hidden from him by a jutting curtain of rock.

"Hey, they're using timber," he exclaimed, and glanced at Pollenport. He was surprised because he was out of the habit of thinking in terms of timber. The northern continent had been deliberately disforested by its inhabitants at some remote period and Paul hadn't so much as seen a tree since leaving the Earth more than a year and a half before.

"Yes," said Pollenport. "Yes, they're using timber all right, but that doesn't surprise me as much as the vastness of the undertaking. Still, I suppose a task's magnitude is the last factor likely to discourage the employers of slave-labour. We've only to think of the pyramids to realise that."

"Sure, but we must mean something very special to them for them to take all this trouble. How many men do you think they'll need to drag us?"

Pollenport shrugged. "Hundreds," he said. "And I'd certainly like to know exactly what their plan is. To get us down the mountain, obviously, but what then?"

Paul didn't reply. He was gazing into the valley where, just as on the previous morning, a great host of slaves was

filing along the paths towards the river. So far there was no trace at all of mist, and the light was so clear that he almost felt he could see the expressions on the creatures' faces.

There was no overseer with the slaves, and they moved sluggishly, continually looking up at the *Skylark* and every now and then waving. Most of them, when they reached the river, threw themselves on their bellies at the water's edge and spent several minutes drinking.

"Then they can drink all right with those clamps on their heads," Paul remarked. "I wonder how they make out when they want to eat."

Other slaves, not wearing clamps and presumably foremen, were running to and fro along the river-bank, gesticulating wildly in their efforts to get their charges to work, and at last the slaves condescended to take up their positions. They spread themselves for almost a mile along the river, some actually standing in the water while the majority toiled in the crop itself.

The leaves of the crop were broad and ragged, something like rhubarb leaves, and the slaves' task was to pull the plants up by the roots. This appeared to need considerable effort and as soon as a slave had uprooted a plant he flung it to the men in the river, who washed the soil from it, stripped it of its foliage and then let the root itself—bulbous, yellow and as large as a sugar-beet—float away downstream.

"And that's that," murmured Paul, laughing. "Too bad if there's no one around to collect. . . ."

Later he was to discover that this was the normal method of transporting the vegetables. In some cases they floated down the rivers for hundreds of miles before being collected at convenient points in great sleeve-shaped nets stretched across the stream. All in all, the yellow vegetable played as large a part in the economy of South Antigeos as the potato plays in ours.

SAM cooked the breakfast that morning while Pollenport and Paul were still on the gantry. He had woken up feeling much better, but hungry, and the realisation that nearly forty-eight hours had passed since he had had anything in the way of a proper meal had shocked him considerably.

So now, with only a small stove to cook on, he set about preparing a breakfast for three along traditional lines. First he cooked quantities of porridge, then he opened cans of bacon, mushrooms and tomatoes and made the air in the compartment blue with the smoke of frying. The meal was to be rounded off with toast, butter and marmalade. And, of course, tea.

His task so absorbed him that he was only dimly aware of activities beyond the *Skylark's* walls. He heard sounds of hammering and sawing, but the lucidex was misted with steam and he could see nothing outside except vague shapes moving in the middle distance. "Still getting their contraption ready, I suppose," he muttered as he juggled with frying-pan and plates. "Well, it'll have to wait till I've had some breakfast."

He shouted: "Come and get it" up the communication-shaft, and was irritated to the point of exasperation when a quarter of an hour passed before the others appeared; and his emotions nearly overwhelmed him when Pollenport, emerging from the shaft, hardly looked at the food and merely remarked: "The air's a bit thick, isn't it?"

Paul was more tactful. He had the decency to look contrite and a little shamefaced, and at once congratulated Sam on his efforts. "Gee, Sam, we had no idea you were doing all this for us," he murmured. "We're sorry we were so long, but the fact is we just couldn't stop watching those slaves at work. Hell, you never saw such a mix-up."

"Mix-up?" queried Sam, thawing a little.

"Sure," said Paul. "It's like hell bursting loose all over, and each of those guys acts like he hates every other one. Mules have got nothing on those boys for sheer obstinacy and bad temper—why, they've got about as much idea of co-operation as a dog has of the differential calculus. That's so, isn't it, Jonah?"

"Yes," said Pollenport. "They certainly seem to be peculiarly unco-ordinated."

"That's rating it low," said Paul, with a laugh. "They just never leave off squabbling and bickering, and every so often real stand-up fights break out. Then the foremen weigh in with rocks and anything else they can throw until the trouble dies down."

"And what about old Furry?" asked Sam. "Has he shown up yet?"

"Oh yes," said Pollenport. "He put in a brief appearance soon after work started, and he was accompanied by a pal, one of his own kind, but even larger and grimmer. In fact, I think he must have been some sort of overlord, since his belt was more lavishly bejewelled than the other chap's and he wore a small metal circlet round his cap, just above his vizor. And the helots nearly tied themselves into knots keeping their eyes covered as he rode amongst them."

"But it didn't help them any," said Paul. "That old gorilla just slashed around with his whip for the hell of it. He knocked a couple of slaves off their feet and then ran the point of his whip through another guy's thigh. And all the time we could hear him going: 'Yuh! Yuh! Yuh! . . .' Laughing, maybe."

"Must have a cruel streak in him," said Sam, helping himself to more bacon and tomatoes. "And what about the chap in the hat?"

"He's there now," Pollenport told him. "And I rather gather he acts as the engineer. Anyway, the work's carried

out under his direction, he takes all the measurements and then makes calculations on a bunch of strings rather like a Peruvian quipu. The chief foreman—the one we saw yesterday, with the strip of fur round his middle—consults him from time to time and that seems to be almost all the communication the hat-man has with the helots. In fact, he's very aloof and dignified, and also he's a good deal older than I realised yesterday. In the sunlight his face is a mass of minute wrinkles, and I'd say he's well over seventy, and quite probably eighty. What's more, I feel almost certain now that he belongs to the same ethnic group as the North Antigeosians."

"Do you think so?" said Sam, doubtfully. "What I mean is, there must be some tidy differences. I mean, our friends in the north would never stand for all this cruelty."

"Well, it's a case of *force majeure*, isn't it?" said Pollenport. "And until we know something of the way this society is organised it's hardly fair to criticise. Anyway, I fancy I saw traces of compassion in the hat-man's face when the slaves were being whipped and his attitude to the overseer is discreetly contemptuous."

The kettle came to the boil just then and Sam jumped up. "What exactly are these chaps making?" he asked, as he filled the tea-pot.

"A huge sled of sorts," said Pollenport, "and the timber they're using for it seems to be almost identical with pine. They split the logs and then lay them out side by side with the flat part to the ground. Smaller split logs are placed crosswise over the first lot, holes are drilled into them with a bow drill and one of the slaves drives pegs into the holes. No nails at all are used and, of course, the tools are fairly primitive—for a mallet they used a shaped lump of rock, and their saws are simply serrated rods made of a metal that might be bronze."

Sam rubbed his chin gloomily. "Well, I don't know,"

he muttered, "and I'll be very surprised, not to say grateful, if they manage to get us down all in one piece. I know that if I were a bookie I wouldn't offer better than one to seven against us going over the edge."

Paul laughed, then checked himself. "Listen," he said, suddenly realising that the noise of hammering had ceased. He quickly put down his tea-cup, rose and went to the compartment's farther wall.

"Something's going on," he murmured, and rubbed the lucidex with his sleeve. "The foremen have got all the slaves lined up in rows, and they look as if they're waiting for something."

Sam and Pollenport joined him, and the three of them gazed through the lucidex at the long disorderly ranks. A certain amount of pushing and jostling was taking place, but in the main the creatures were fairly subdued, and most of them were staring expectantly down the gully. They had their backs to the spaceship, and for the moment their interest in whatever it was they were awaiting seemed even greater than their interest in Pollenport.

The man in the Van Eyck hat was sitting on a rock somewhat apart from the slaves, eating a crimson pear-shaped fruit and looking in the *Skylark's* direction. His expression was one of puzzled interest, but when he saw that the space-travellers were returning his gaze he glanced away quickly as if he realised it wasn't courteous to stare into other people's spaceships. So far he had remained rather aloof as regards the *Skylark*, and now Pollenport decided that this attitude was due to politeness rather than a lack of interest.

Sam's sympathy was roused by a group of rickety, half-starved children, who, in spite of the sunshine, were shivering miserably and huddling together for warmth. "My God, some of them can't be more than seven or eight," he said, and it shocked him particularly to see that their

heads were clamped in metal contraptions similar to those worn by the adults. "I suppose they have to work?" he said.

"Sure," said Paul, and explained that the children were employed in making the wooden pegs which served the helot carpenters in place of nails.

"Ah, here's old Furry again," said Sam, and through the ranks of slaves they glimpsed the overseer as he trotted up the gully on his white animal. When he was beyond the slaves, he wheeled his mount and drew rein, then took one of the small white balls from the pouch on his belt and fixed it carefully on to the tip of his steel rod. Meanwhile, a number of slaves came toiling up the gully carrying, one between each pair of them, large wooden tubs slung on poles, and as they passed behind the ranks, quite close to the *Skylark*, the space-travellers could see that the tubs were filled with vegetables much like the ones that were being harvested in the valley, except that these were dirty and half rotten.

As soon as the slaves saw the food their excitement became almost uncontrollable and they were only restrained from breaking rank by the threatening presence of the overseer. Even so, one wretched creature ran crazily forward and tried to snatch some of the vegetables before two of the foremen threw themselves upon him. He gripped the rim of the tub and clung to it desperately while the foremen struggled to tear him away.

The overseer roared: "Yuh!" and gestured angrily with his free hand. The foremen at once let go of the frenzied slave and stood back. The overseer's steel rod flashed in the air, the white ball flew from its tip and struck the slave forcibly between his shoulder-blades. He reeled back from the tub and fell to the ground, writhing and kicking.

This incident seemed to leave the other slaves quite unmoved and indifferent. They were simply impatient to be

fed, and looked on sullenly while the chief foreman picked up the white ball and ran with it to the overseer, who replaced it on the end of the steel rod. The foreman stood waiting for something with his hand held out and his eyes covered, and the overseer unhurriedly produced a small object from under his belt and dropped it into the outstretched hand.

It was a key of some kind and, with it the foreman worked his way along the ranks, unlocking the clamp on each man's head. He fitted the key into a lock at the back of the metal band running round the man's head, gave it a sharp upward wrench and then the slave was able to lift the contraption away and place it on the ground at his feet. Each creature, as soon as he was released, vigorously rubbed and kneaded his jaws, opening and closing his mouth several times to ease the cramped muscles. The skin beneath the clamps was as pale as a lizard's belly, and several of the slaves had horrible sores where the metal had chafed.

"So the idea of the clamps is to stop them stealing food, I suppose," said Sam.

"Yes," said Pollenport. "And, I expect, to prevent them running away. A slave on his own would be dead of starvation in a week or so unless he could get rid of the clamp."

"He could file it off," Paul remarked.

"I don't know," said Pollenport. "I think it's quite likely that these wretched helots aren't allowed to know much about metal. After all, it's very much in the ruling caste's interests to invest metalwork with all possible mystery since in the last analysis their whole economy depends upon the clamps—depends, that is, upon having immense numbers of slaves and then making sure that they can consume only the tiniest fraction of what they produce."

The foremen handed out the vegetables, two to each adult and one to each child, and the slaves squatted on the

ground, biting and gnawing at the vegetables' hard flesh, gulping down great lumps of it, as if there wasn't a moment to be lost; and, while they ate, they eyed their neighbours with an intense animal distrust, as though half-expecting to be attacked and the food snatched away.

The foremen—there were nine of them in all—kept the soundest vegetables for themselves, and they were allowed three each, as well as an almost black strip of smoke-dried meat which the chief foreman took from the bottom of one of the tubs. The foremen ate the food sitting together on the half-finished sled; they ate more slowly than the ordinary slaves and even seemed to enjoy the meal. Four or five of them, Paul noticed, slipped away furtively and hid their extra vegetable among the rocks, presumably meaning to retrieve it and eat it later.

Suddenly the overseer roared and slashed the air with his whip, and the slaves reacted sharply. They had finished eating and apparently the overseer's shout was the signal for them to replace the clamps. Each slave put the contraption back on his head and snapped the lock to, and the foremen moved quickly among them making sure that every lock was properly fastened. Then the overseer walked his steed slowly down the gully and, within five minutes work on the sled had been resumed. . . .

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TWO murky days followed that single day of sunshine, and when yet another morning dawned uncertainly behind curtains of rain, Paul was heard to remark cynically: "If this goes on, I'll begin to think we're back in England."

Boredom, discomfort and lack of exercise had made both Paul and Sam liverish and irritable, and Pollenport found the

task of keeping the peace harder than at any time during the six-months' voyage through space. Then the crew's sense of proportion had tended to keep tempers equable, no one could sustain a squabble in the infinite void, but now there was no such factor to balance against ordinary human vagaries. There was nothing inspiring about life in a grounded, tilting spaceship, where one could hardly move without treading on someone else's fingers or upsetting the chessboard, and the future was too unimaginable to be anticipated.

Sam overheard Paul's remark about England and, whereas his normal self would have smiled, this morning he bristled with resentment. "Leave England out of it," he growled. "You're always picking on England one way and another, and I can take just so much of it and no more."

Paul, who had never in his life consciously "picked on England", stared at him in amazement, and Pollenport hastily sought to change the subject. He knew that homesickness rather than chauvinism was the emotion behind Sam's remark, and, while he didn't take it seriously, he was afraid that Paul might.

He coughed and glanced through the lucidex.

"That damned sled must be nearly ready," he said. "In fact, I daresay they'll have a shot at moving us today."

"Well, I hope so," said Sam, going red.

"Me, too," murmured Paul. "Come on, Sam, let's have a game of chess while we're waiting."

"Chess?" exclaimed Sam, as if they hadn't already played a dozen games in the last few days. "Yes, that's an idea . . ."

As it happened, Pollenport's surmise proved right and, towards midday, a number of slaves approached the *Skylark* carrying ropes and long poles. "I suppose we'd better strap ourselves into the bunks," he said, as the slaves started throwing the ropes over the spaceship. "If we go over the

edge our chances of survival are negligible, but they might be slightly increased by our being in the bunks."

In the event, however, the whole episode of moving the spaceship from its precarious position was singularly lacking in drama. From start to finish, the manoeuvre took the best part of four hours, a steady rain blurred the lucidex and, from the point of view of the men in the bunks, there was little to be seen except the straining bodies of the helots as they hauled on the ropes. The last part of the operation, lifting the *Skylark* on to the sled, was accomplished by leverage, and the spaceship was raised inch by inch up the rough wooden ramp as the slaves thrust their long poles under its hull and levered, using boulders and logs as fulcra.

The man in the hat ("Van Eyck" as the space-travellers had come to call him) directed and controlled the work and Pollenport was interested to observe with what precision the operation was carried out, reflecting that he had seen men make more to-do about shifting a piano than the Anti-geosians made about moving the huge spaceship. Van Eyck's was the mind behind the operation, and it was clear that his intelligence was of a high order. He could control slave-labour because he understood its limitations just as well as he understood the technical problems of shifting the spaceship from the cliff's edge to the sled, and it was distressing to think of his being so utterly subordinate to the brutal and mindless overseer. Pollenport thought of Napoleon's dictum: "There are only two powers in the world, the sword and the mind; and, in the long run, the sword is always overcome by the mind," and wondered whether it applied in South Antigeos and, if so, how long it would be before it started to show results. He wondered what strains and pressures lay behind this unholy society and what forces were struggling to break loose from the savage frustrations of a slave economy. . . .

Once on the sled, the spaceship was securely roped down and wedged into place, and it was clear that the plan was to drag both sled and spaceship down the mountain by sheer unaided slave-power. Rollers under the sled would have lightened the task, even greasing the logs that were to act as runners would have helped, but with labour cheaper than dirt, it was no one's business, not even Van Eyck's, to think of such things.

The rain was coming down harder than ever now, and the slaves in their hundreds stood waiting sullenly, strung out along ropes attached to the sled's forepart and wearing primitive harness that passed across their chests and under their armpits; and presently the overseer arrived, bawling and slashing about him with his whip.

His arrival was the signal to start. The chief foreman was standing on the sled with Van Eyck, sheltering under the *Skylark's* hull, and, when he saw the overseer, he gestured vigorously and hurled a handful of pebbles into the mass of helots. The ropes drew taut and the slaves leant into their harness, straining at the ropes with their heads low and their arms dangling; and the timbers groaned and creaked under the tension.

Behind the sled, other slaves thrust great levering poles under the balks, and jerkily the immense cortège started down the mountain. . . .

(xii)

DUSK was falling by the time the *Skylark* reached the valley and from then on, with the sled rumbling over patches of scree interspersed with grass-grown areas of turf, progress was faster; and presently it dawned on the space-travellers that the sled hadn't been built simply to get them down the mountain.

"They've obviously got a more distant destination in view," said Pollenport, and wondered how much longer he and the others would have to put up with their confined and uncomfortable quarters.

A mile further on, with darkness closing round the spaceship like a grey fog, the overseer called a halt and the slaves were permitted to slip from their harness and make off to whatever miserable hovels or caves they were allowed to inhabit. Van Eyck was borne off in a litter—a simple rope-chair slung between two poles—and apparently it was the duty of the two youngest foremen to carry him. They moved off into the darkness with the chief foreman leading, and the others straggling along in the rear; and within a few minutes the *Skylark* was alone in the deserted valley.

"This might be our chance to escape," said Paul. "Maybe, now there's no pressure on the exit hatch, I can shift it."

He clambered along the shaft as far as the hatch, unlocked it and removed the wing nuts. It swung open quite easily, and for the first time in five days he breathed fresh air, and felt it cool and damp against his face.

Excitedly he returned to the control compartment. "Jonah, the hatch is open!" he exclaimed. "And, hell, there's no reason why we shouldn't pack a few things and clear off."

"Where to?" asked Pollenport, smiling. "No, surely our wisest course is to stay where we are and see what happens. I agree it would be pleasant to get out of here, but I think we should put up with it for a few days longer. What do you say, Sam?"

"I suppose you're right," muttered Sam. "I don't like the look of the countryside—in fact, I've never seen such shocking mountains—and if we went I think it'd be a case of out of the frying-pan. Which reminds me, I want my supper . . ."

So they stayed in the *Skylark* and consoled themselves

with the thought that at least they could get away whenever they wanted to—although, in fact, since this was the only night they were left alone, they were never again to get the chance. Altogether, the journey was to take twenty-two days, and on all subsequent nights the slaves, now no longer within easy reach of their homes, lit fires and slept on the ground as near the *Skylark* as the foremen would let them get, while the foremen slept under the sled and Van Eyck had the use of a leather tent which was pitched each evening as soon as the cortège halted.

The days were tedious, particularly during the journey's early stages. Fog hung in the valleys and passes, and the *Skylark's* crew learnt little about the scenery except that it was mountainous and ugly. Paul and Sam spent most of their time repairing the pedal generator and, in spite of the difficult working conditions, even managed to make good the worst of the damage; and Pollenport constituted himself the official observer. This entailed sitting in the control compartment from dawn till dusk each day, making notes on phenomena seen, and estimating the distance travelled. At the end of the journey he calculated that they had covered some six hundred miles, an average, over the twenty-two days, of two miles an hour for fifteen hours a day.

At first, they saw few signs of civilisation. Now and then they passed through valleys in which slaves were working—harvesting root crops or tending flocks of small marsupials, not unlike wallabies—but that was all. Except for an occasional overseer, befurred and vizored, all the natives they encountered were slaves and, what was even more remarkable, they saw no women. If their experience of the south continent had not reached beyond the first week or so, they would have left with the idea that its inhabitants were of three species, but only one sex.

Whenever they came upon slaves something like a riot took place, with the creatures incontinently leaving their

work and crowding round the spaceship. They stared through the lucidex and eagerly questioned, in gestures, the other slaves, those harnessed to the sled, and sometimes progress was impeded for as long as an hour, while the foremen pelted the creatures with stones, and the overseer charged them furiously, flailing like a maniac and roaring at the top of his voice.

The eighth day was comparatively clear. At least there was no fog or rain, and a red sun burned darkly in an ominous purple sky. Ugly igneous rocks crowded the view, and the valleys were choked with tuff and barren of vegetation. The temperature within the control chamber rose steadily and the cortège travelled over the crumbling ground almost in silence, a muffled sepulchral silence, while the shuffling of hundreds of feet churned up the volcanic ash into a great cloud that hung in the air like a doom. The grey-white dust, clinging to the slaves' bodies, destroyed their insecure identities, made them into ghosts, into corpses that moved, and Paul remarked lugubriously: "Could be we're all dead. Could be we've got us hitched to a team of zombies, heading for hell."

All that day they crawled deeper and deeper into the volcanic region, and slowly the stark shapeless rocks closed in on them. Basalt cliffs, flanked by slopes of glistening obsidian, hid the horizon and the sun reflected redly on the obsidian like firelight on black glass; and towards the end of the day two hours were lost while the slaves struggled to haul them inch by inch up the course of a solidified river of lava.

No one, not even Pollenport, was prepared for the sight they saw when they reached the top of the slope and found themselves poised over a crater vaster than Kilauea, vaster than any terrestrial crater—a smoking heaving lake of lava suppurating like a sore at the hideous heart of that region. The floor of the crater was a ruby-dark ocean of semi-liquid

molten rock and Pollenport estimated that it was not more than seventy feet beneath them. They could feel the heat beating up through the lucidex, and Paul suddenly became apprehensive, thinking how easy it would be for the Antigeosians to tip the *Skylark* into the crater and dispose of them once and for all.

He glanced round and was glad to see that the overseer was nowhere in sight. Most of the slaves were squatting on their haunches, awed and motionless, and two of the foremen were preparing to pitch Van Eyck's tent. Presumably, then, it was intended to camp here for the night.

Slightly relieved, Paul returned his gaze to the crater just in time to see a huge fissure shoot across the surface like fork lightning and through the rent he could see the magma itself, a swirling mass of yellow-red incandescence welling up and then cooling to a dull red; and a moment later a great fountain of liquid fire burst through the molten rock, gushing up to a height of a hundred feet or more, while the roar of its blazing gases shook the spaceship like a salvo of gunfire.

"Christmas!" muttered Sam, startled. "I'd say it's time we weren't here."

"We're staying the night," said Paul, and pointed to Van Eyck's tent.

Sam glanced in that direction and then at Pollenport. "Jonah, we should protest," he said. "Even if it's safe, it's damned hot and unhealthy. Last place I'd choose for a camp site."

"I agree," said Pollenport, smiling. "In fact, I'm wondering why we were brought up here at all. There must be other routes."

Paul watched the seething lava uneasily. "You don't think they're aiming to chuck us in?" he asked.

"No," said Pollenport, with conviction. "The overseer would doubtless be delighted to get rid of us in that way, but

he daren't. He's terrified of the slaves—yes, terrified of them, and they're on the verge of revolt as it is. But none of that explains why we were brought here."

They were still discussing the matter when the overseer rode up. He had divested himself of his furs, but as the robes he now had on were also brown and cut to a similar pattern, the general effect was the same. He still wore the metal belt and carried the steel whip, his face was hidden by a vizor of the same fine material as the rest of his garments, and his cap, which was taller and more pointed than the fur one, inevitably reminded Paul of the Klan that had haunted his nightmares as a child.

A narrow ridge of conglomerate slag lay between the *Skylark* and the crater, and when the overseer dismounted he strode out on to this ridge and stood there, glowering at the spaceship with the lava light smouldering in his crimson eyes. His robe, damp with sweat where it touched his body, clung to the great muscles of his torso like a skin and, against that background of sulphur-yellow smoke and livid sky he looked as doomful a figure as ever loomed over a dubious and threatening world.

"Looks a treat, doesn't he?" muttered Sam.

"Sure. Got a fine sense of theatre," said Paul, but he was impressed all the same and, when the overseer suddenly flung up an arm and let out a baleful yell his heart jumped like a startled rabbit.

The slender whip of steel flashed through the air and, as if in answer to this command, another blast of burning gas and lava went blazing up into the sky, and the overseer glared at the space-travellers with a roar of triumph.

"No-one more surprised than the medicine man," Paul murmured. "What's he trying to put over?"

Pollenport laughed. "I see now why we were brought up here," he said. "He wants us to know that, if we're gods, he's a god too, and these are his works. He's hoping to

intimidate us, and I'd give my eye-teeth to be able to do something really impressive in reply—such as turning him into a tea-pot.”

A minute later the overseer seemed to become aware of his audience's indifference, and then his exultation changed to anger. With a furious gesture he hurled an order at the chief foreman and then turned to back the spaceship, stamping with anger and slashing at the timbers of the sled with his whip.

“Perhaps we ought to cover our eyes,” said Sam. “I mean, just to show we realise he's the big noise.”

“Good God, no,” said Pollenport, alarmed. “That'd be a sure way of losing the slaves' respect. How could they believe we were gods after that? Why, even Van Eyck doesn't have to cover his eyes. Only the slaves and the slave-foremen do that.”

“That's true,” said Sam. “Yes, it was a silly suggestion, but this geezer gets on my nerves with his tantrums and airs.”

A startled exclamation from Paul made them glance round, and they saw that he was looking towards the huddle of slaves at the front of the sled. Some sort of a scuffle was going on, and Pollenport could see one of the slaves lying on the slag, kicking furiously and clinging to one of the sled's ropes. Over him stood three of the foremen and they were trying to get hold of him to drag him away.

“They're going to chuck him into the crater!” said Paul, horrified. “Just to show us!”

That was certainly the plan, Pollenport decided, and he glanced towards the overseer, who was glowering at the struggling slave and carefully loading his whip, fitting a ball to its point.

“Paul, get the exit hatch open . . . and, Sam, fetch me a revolver.”

Pollenport hadn't any precise idea of what he intended

to do, but he was certain of one thing—if that wretched slave was thrown into the crater, the overseer would also die. He had no illusions regarding his marksmanship, but he felt that, with six rounds and an enemy who didn't understand the nature of a gun, the odds were in his favour.

As Sam came back with the revolver, Pollenport caught a glimpse of the foremen dragging the slave by his heels towards the crater. "Keep away from the lucidex, Sam," he muttered, as he climbed into the shaft. "They won't throw the wretch in unless we're watching. . . ."

Paul had the exit hatch open by the time Pollenport reached it. "I put my head out and had a quick look round," he said. "Everything on this side seems fairly deserted. And the rope ladder's in place all right."

Pollenport nodded, pushed the revolver into his pocket and wriggled feet-first out of the exit hatch. The spaceship's hull hid him from the overseer and, as soon as his feet touched the ground, he crept to the rear of the sled and peered out cautiously from behind the balks of timber.

Another foreman had joined the original three, and the four of them were standing on the ridge with the slave spread-eagled between them. The overseer was staring at the spaceship, clearly disconcerted by the absence of his audience, and Pollenport stepped out into the open, waving the revolver and shouting at the men holding the slave.

The overseer wheeled round, amazed and furious. Pollenport tried to slip past him but he backed away and at the same time gestured frantically to the foremen, clearly ordering them to fling the slave into the cauldron. A shrill terrified scream burst from the wretch's clamped jaws, and Pollenport fired. . . .

As the explosion roared about his head, disjointed and confused impressions crowded his retinae. He saw the foremen drop the slave and scatter. He saw the overseer reel and stumble through the smoke as if struck blind. He saw

the steel whip leap high into the air and hang momentarily against the sky before it fell into the crater; and he caught a last glimpse of it sticking like a dart in the lava before the heat fused it into a splutter of sparks.

The shot had roused the slaves. They were swarming through the half-darkness towards the *Skylark* and, as Pollenport ran for the rope ladder, hands clutched at his clothes uncertainly, as if their owners were almost too awed to touch him.

Paul was waiting for him and, grinning, he helped him in. "Nice work," he murmured.

"It may have been nice work," said Pollenport, "but I don't know what happened."

"Why, you shot the steel whip out of his hand."

"Yes, I suppose I did. Only it's curious, because I aimed at his chest."

Paul laughed and, as they emerged into the control compartment, Pollenport asked what had become of the overseer.

"I don't know," said Paul. "He just seemed to vanish."

"Yes, that about describes it," said Sam. "Losing his whip seemed to take all the spine out of him. For a moment I thought he was going to stumble into the crater, then he saw the slaves coming towards him and tried to get away. Some of the slaves passed within inches of him, but they were only interested in you, and didn't seem to mind him any more. I didn't see one cover his eyes, and it strikes me those whips are damned important. I reckon the overseers don't amount to much without them."

"You're probably right," said Pollenport. "And, quite by accident, I was able to show the slaves that I've got a more powerful magic than the overseer's magic. In fact, I've provided an authentic miracle, which is something most gods fail to do, and now I imagine the overlords will find themselves faced with some ticklish political problems."

"You don't think they'll have a shot at rolling us into the crater tonight?" asked Sam.

"Hardly," said Pollenport, smiling, and he nodded towards the lucidex, through which could be seen the thousands of slaves milling around the spaceship with the glare from the crater lighting their upturned faces. Their hands were high above their heads, their eyes gleamed with a wild devouring ecstasy, and Pollenport remarked that he'd be sorry for any overseer who ventured among them while their present mood held.

It was almost night now and, as the sky's darkness deepened, the sea of molten rock grew as red as blood, with fissures marbling its surface, and the fissures shifted and merged from time to time, bursting out into blazing cascades of liquid magma. . . .

(xiii)

THE next day the slaves lay about on the hot slag and made no attempt to haul the sled away from the crater. Van Eyck took one look round, then retreated into his tent and the foremen's feeble efforts at urging the slaves to their duty ceased altogether when the customary tubs of food arrived. Then the foremen sat round the tubs and gorged themselves, while the other slaves ran berserk with hunger, banging their heads against rocks in their efforts to get the clamps off and gazing up at Pollenport in anguished supplication. The scene was a horrifying commentary on the realities of South Antigean civilisation, and the *Skylark's* crew were on the verge of taking files and cold chisels to the slaves when there was a sudden commotion and five mounted overseers descended upon the cortège.

With painstaking thoroughness, the overseers proceeded

to thrash the slaves into a respectful sense of the order of things, and all five were so similar to the original overseer in dress, physique and temperament that it was hard to say whether or not he was amongst them. Pollenport was inclined to think so, but he was wrong and later he was to learn that there were only two possible fates for an overseer disarmed by an enemy—either he killed himself or he was put to death.

The slaves were given no food that day, but with five overseers harassing them in place of one they made good progress, and by nightfall had left the worst of the volcanic region behind. The days that followed were monotonous to the point of tedium, and Pollenport found little to note except a gradual change of scenery—the country became less mountainous, less rugged, and the areas of land-cultivation increased. Everywhere the *Skylark* was greeted by hordes of excited slaves, but still the space-travellers saw no other inhabitants and no women. Also, they saw no signs of mechanical power, not even windmills or watermills, and it was evident that all progress in that direction had been stultified by the inexhaustible supplies of cheap labour.

It was on the twentieth day that they first encountered South Antigeon women. That day was altogether an exciting one, for most of it was spent in sight of the sea with the sled slithering and bumping over a slimy-green expanse of chalk flats. Throughout the morning the space-travellers had watched slaves fishing from huge rafts, six men on each, with one man warping the raft through the water by endlessly slinging a grapple into the sea and then hauling on its cable; and towards midday the great tidal wave, produced by Antigeos' smaller moon, had swept across the ocean, throwing the slaves into something near panic as they struggled frantically to get the rafts ashore before they were swamped and overturned.

Sleds similar to the one on which the *Skylark* rested, but

much smaller, were used to drag the catches up the beach, and the fact that these sleds all took one direction across the chalk flats suggested they were nearing some kind of populated centre.

"I've an idea we're reaching journey's end," said Pollenport, and the crew's mood lifted. For days they had been haunted by the possibility of the journey lasting months, and Pollenport's remark made them almost light-headed. Their interest in the Antigean scene revived and their cheerfulness was fortified by an increase in the signs of civilisation. The fishing-rafts became more numerous, and the *Skylark* was overtaken more and more often by other sleds—heading for the distant cliffs—laden with fish, seaweed and mysterious marine vegetables. Also, for the first time, they saw another Antigean of Van Eyck's kind. He was swimming in the surf some way away, and through the field-glasses they discovered that he was entirely naked except for his fantastic hat, identical with the one that Van Eyck wore. . . .

The cortège spent almost the whole of that day crawling across the chalk flats and it wasn't until the late afternoon that it reached the line of cliffs skirting the far side. The cliffs were of granite, perhaps a thousand feet high and so dazzlingly white that the sunlight striking their crystalline surfaces seemed to be on the verge of splitting into its prismatic colours; and, as the sled laboured over the shingle along the foot of this stupendous wall, Paul shaded his eyes and gazed into the glare. "I guess there must be an opening of sorts somewhere hereabouts," he remarked.

"No doubt," said Pollenport. "But I don't intend to give myself a headache looking for it."

"I can see the mouth of a cave," Paul murmured and then, a moment later, added urgently: "Hey, you two, come here . . ."

"What is it?" asked Pollenport, rising unhurriedly.

"Women," said Paul, and, if any seductive ideas of female loveliness stirred in Pollenport's mind, they were sadly dispelled when he reached the lucidex. The *Skylark* was passing the cave that Paul had mentioned and squatting in its mouth were two creatures that appeared at first glance to be no more than two skeletons held together by a tegument of wrinkled brown skin and hung about with the tattered rags of what had once been brightly-coloured clothes. Pollenport surveyed these withered objects through the glasses, and that they had once been women was just discernible, but that they were still alive would have been unbelievable but for small furtive movements of their hands as they feebly crammed scraps of fish into their shapeless mouths.

Paul suggested that they might be slave women, worn-out and discarded, but Pollenport shook his head. "Unlikely," he said. "I can't imagine the overseers allowing any slave to live a day beyond his usefulness."

Suddenly Sam pointed towards the front of the sled. "Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Look what the slaves are doing . . ."

Pollenport shifted his gaze from the crones to the team of slaves, and then understood Sam's surprise. As the slaves trudged past, they turned their heads towards the women and sketchily covered their eyes—that is to say, they saluted those stricken hags as if they were overseers, although the gesture itself was much more perfunctory and indefinite.

"I don't understand," murmured Pollenport, and an idea that the ancient crones might be ruling-class relicts was promptly brushed aside by the behaviour of one of the overseers, who came charging past the *Skylark* towards the cave, bellowing and threatening the women with his whip. The two old hags took fright and went scrabbling back into the shadows, crawling sideways like crabs, as if too decrepit to stand up.

"Terrible," muttered Pollenport, deeply shocked. "Marx tells us that social progress can be measured with precision by the social position of the female sex and, from what we've seen of South Antigeos, I can't think he was wrong."

He went on to remark that, if the women were neither slaves nor of the ruling caste, then they must belong to Van Eyck's race, but Paul had his doubts about this. "The slaves don't salute Van Eyck," he said, "so why should they salute the women?"

Pollenport admitted it was puzzling. "I could wish we'd seen how Van Eyck reacted," he said, but this hadn't been possible, since Van Eyck was riding on the sled beneath them and out of sight. . . .

(xiv)

THE scenery on the last day of the journey was hardly describable in terrestrial terms and, as the cortège crawled through a tawny wilderness of decaying rock, the space-travellers had a stronger impression of being on another planet than at any time hitherto. The floor of this wilderness was hard and white, and as level as a billiard-table, and everywhere it was studded with fantastic crags rearing up from the plain like monoliths in a surrealist's nightmare—lumps of rotting granite that the weather had chewed into a variety of preposterous shapes, so that some looked like gigantic calcified mushrooms, others like fossilised cacti and petrified trees, and a few like diseased pachyderms slumbering under a sultry reddish-mauve sky; and slowly the distant horizon loomed out of the haze as a smoke-blue line of soft rounded hills, dominated by a white-plumed volcano.

The crags and outcrops became more numerous as the day wore on, sometimes crowding the sled route so closely that

the cortège had to leave the track and make wide detours into the desert, and presently continuous walls of rock began to form so that the whole character of the scene changed and the space-travellers found themselves trundling through a shadowed world of gorges, ravines and gullies. As they penetrated deeper into this labyrinth it grew less wild and rugged, the faces of the cliffs became smooth curtains of pale yellow chalk furrowed by broad channels that ran between the cliffs like streets between buildings, and when Paul remarked that he felt as if they were entering a city he voiced the crew's ruling impression.

"Yes, a city," murmured Pollenport. "But where are the citizens?"

He had hardly said this when the five overseers, who had formed the *Skylarks's* escort ever since the episode at the crater, suddenly became alert and exchanged hurried gestures, then urged their mounts to the head of the column, angrily whipping the slaves out of their way as they went. A moment later two young girls came running along the defile between the cliffs and within a few seconds they were followed by dozens of other Antigeosians, mostly women and children, until all the space ahead was filled with a jostling throng that forced the cortège to a standstill.

The overseers walked their mounts into the crowd and cleared a gangway simply by waving the people aside. There was no charging, shouting or whip-slashing, and the newcomers, for their part, showed no particular fear of the overseers. The cortège crawled forward once more, and the men in the *Skylark* had a kaleidoscopic impression of gaily-coloured dresses, upturned faces and waving hands.

"These women look a whole lot like the northerners," Paul murmured, but as he spoke he realised that the differences were almost as great as the similarities, and although for the most part these people had the same round faces, green eyes and dark hair as the inhabitants of the

northern continent, on average they inclined to be shorter and thicker-set, their complexions a lighter brown and their movements not as graceful. Yet it was in some subtler way that they differed most and at first Paul was unable to define it except vaguely as an atmosphere of uneasiness and anxiety, and it struck him that, although these women welcomed the *Skylark* with so much gaiety and animation, their smiles were constrained as if they masked inward tensions quite unknown among the uninhibited peoples of the north.

"I can't see any men at all," Sam remarked, and Pollenport agreed that he couldn't see any either. The women, however, now numbered hundreds and they were of every age from childhood to extreme old age. The dresses they wore resembled kimonos, with full skirts gathered in at the waist under broad sashes, and many of the younger women wore their bodicés open as far as the sash, allowing glimpses of tawny flesh and rounded breasts. Their kimonos were all elaborately embroidered with a range of motifs similar to those on the overseers' belts, and now Pollenport felt almost certain that the designs were made up from the characters of a written language.

A surprising number of the women were visibly pregnant, and several had babies at their breasts. In fact, it was Pollenport's impression that the children outnumbered the adults. He noticed one mother, hardly out of her teens herself, who had two children clinging to her skirts, a baby in her arms and another on the way, and as he studied the little group he came a step nearer to understanding the sinister implications underlying the overlords' rule. He drew Paul's attention to the girl-mother and told him to take particular notice of the two children at her side. "Tell me if you notice anything about them out of the ordinary," he said.

Paul gazed at the two children for a minute or so. "The little boy's sick, isn't he?" he said, finally.

"I don't think he is," said Pollenport, and it occurred

to Paul that he had seldom seen his chief look so sad and shocked.

"What's wrong, Jonah?" he asked.

"Look at the children again," Pollenport murmured, "and tell me exactly what you see."

Paul was puzzled, but his glance went back to the children. "I suppose the little girl's about five," he said. "She's got a round face with dimples, light brown complexion and light green eyes. She's wearing an embroidered frock very like her mother's, and she's so excited she can hardly keep still." He turned to Pollenport. "Is that all right?"

"Yes. Now describe the boy."

"Well, I should say he's about a year younger than the little girl. I can't see the colour of his eyes, but his face is drawn and grey, he hasn't much hair and he's dressed in a blue garment without any real shape in it. He's watching us pass, but he seems apathetic about it all, and he looks worried and miserable——" He broke off abruptly, then exclaimed: "My God, they're of different species!"

"Yes. In fact, I'm reasonably certain that that small boy is destined to become a slave."

Paul shivered, and his gaze swept the crowd. Wherever he looked he saw other examples of the two species—small grey-faced boys in drab self-coloured garments, and happy-looking little girls wearing gaily-embroidered dresses, and he saw no boys older than eight or nine.

"I don't get it," he muttered. "What's the explanation, Jonah?"

"I'm not sure," said Pollenport, "but, if what I suspect is the truth, then this society is even more horrible than any we've ever evolved," and for the time being that was as much as he would say. . . .

The defile along which the cortège was moving grew wider, and it was now certain that this place was, in effect,

a city carved out of the chalk. Caves and tunnels honey-combed the cliffs and they were connected with each other by an elaborate system of galleries and flights of steps hewn into the cliff face. There were also caves at ground level, and outside many of these Pollenport noticed slabs of rock as large as tables. The tools and materials of various crafts lay on these tables and Pollenport thought it likely that all the more skilled work of the community was done not by the clamped slaves but by the women. Later he found that he was right about this, and not only did the women work as potters, weavers, dyers, butchers and bakers, but also as blacksmiths, forging the overseers' steel whips and the clamps for the slaves.

Ahead the cliffs were overshadowed by the hills that the space-travellers had last seen in the distance when they were crossing the crag-studded plain. Pale smoke was drifting from the summit of the single volcano, and it was towards this that the cortège headed. First, however, there was an immense open space to be crossed and, with larger crowds than ever accumulating, progress became spasmodic and uncertain. Other overseers, mounted and on foot, began to appear, but there were still fewer than a score in the whole of that vast space, and slaves were hardly more numerous. In fact it looked as if within the city slaves were kept to a minimum and, apart from the sweating teams of two small sleds that had become wedged in the crowd, the only slaves Pollenport saw were a handful of superannuated creatures lurking furtively behind rocks or hovering on the fringes of the crowd; and there was an element of contempt in the fact these ancients weren't wearing clamps—as if the overseers considered them too senile to run away and too dispirited to steal food.

The cortège had almost reached the wall of cliffs beneath the hills before Pollenport saw any other male representative of Van Eyck's race, and when at last such a man came into

view Pollenport studied him with particular interest. He was a much younger man than Van Eyck, probably not more than thirty, but his mode of dress was similar and his vast hat was identical. He was standing motionless on a platform of rock, and at his side was a small boy of about ten with the clear brown skin and green eyes that were apparently characteristic of everyone of Van Eyck's race, just as they were characteristic of all the women that the space-travellers had so far seen. The remarkable thing about this small boy was that he also had one of the enormous hats and he wore it slung over his shoulders—necessarily, since it was, of course, far too large for him to wear on his head.

Pollenport's interest in the significance of the curious hats quickened and he was still wondering about them when he saw yet another; and this one seemed to break all the rules since it was a woman who had it. She also wore it slung over her shoulders and Pollenport was considerably puzzled until it occurred to him that it probably didn't belong to her, but to the tiny baby she was holding in her arms. It was his hat, Pollenport decided, and his mother was simply in charge of it until he was old enough to carry it himself. Yet, even so, it was all extremely mysterious.

A shadow crept over the *Skylark*. The cortège had come to the cliffs, and now it was entering another broad defile. The overseers made half-hearted attempts to prevent the crowd following and it was Pollenport's impression that the cortège was approaching a more exclusive part of the city. Caves and cliff-dwellings were fewer, and he saw nothing to suggest that trades and crafts were carried on in this quarter.

"Hullo, what's up with the slaves?" Sam asked. "They seem to be grovelling a bit," and when Pollenport glanced to the front of the sled he understood what Sam meant. Each slave, straining at his harness, was stumbling forward blindly with his face buried in the crook of his arm and his

head deeply bowed; and at first the reason for this obeisance was not apparent. Also—and this was extraordinary—the overseers also covered their eyes and rode with their heads lowered; and it wasn't until the *Skylark* came abreast of a deep hollow in the cliff that the space-travellers had any idea of what this was all about.

Then they saw the mouth of a vast cave guarded by two mounted overseers, masked and wearing white robes. A flight of shallow steps led up to the cave, flanked by great basalt pillars, which was as symmetrical as a Gothic arch, and standing on the top step was a small group of pale stolid-looking children.

"Overseers' kids!" Sam exclaimed, and Pollenport quickly raised his binoculars.

There were twelve children in all, and the white clothes they wore, resembling surplices, gave them an ecclesiastical look as if they were part of some unhallowed choir—unhallowed because the children had the faces of criminals. Their brows were recessive and narrow, their chins weak and shapeless, and their hair so pale as to give the impression of baldness. In fact, there was no pigmentation at all, and all twelve gazed apathetically at the *Skylark* from pink, half-closed eyes. Pollenport put the oldest child at ten and the youngest at six and, although there was little to distinguish the sexes, he considered that at least half were girls; and their expressions—so far as such featureless faces could be said to have expressions—were sullen, spiteful and cruel.

"Sure, I guess those are ruling-caste children all right," said Paul. "But where do the overseers keep their women?"

"In purdah or something like it," Pollenport suggested, and he added that this cave with its imposing and guarded entrance might well be a zenana. . . .

The long and tedious journey was nearly at an end. A few hundred yards beyond the guarded cave the defile widened

and the flanking cliffs fell back to disclose a broad triangular space under the dark slopes of the volcano. The slaves dragged the *Skylark* to the centre of this space and then, at an order from one of the overseers, shuffled to a standstill.

"I suppose this is where we disembark," said Pollenport and picked up his belt, on which was a revolver in a holster. The crew had made preparations for leaving the *Skylark* some time before and all three planned to carry revolvers as well as small haversacks in which were emergency rations medical packs and torches.

"Where do we go from here?" Paul wondered, and glanced down through the lucidex. The slaves had rid themselves of their harness, and now most of them were squatting on the ground, gazing up at the spaceship expectantly. The crowds of women and children were pressing towards the *Skylark* from all directions, and the overseers gathered in a little group by the sled, obviously wondering how they could persuade the space-travellers to emerge. Van Eyck was with them and they consulted him in hurried anxious gestures, but he remained impassive, and had no suggestion to offer.

"Come on," said Pollenport. "Paul, give me the key and I'll go first."

It was a nerve-racking procedure, opening the exit hatch, throwing down the rope ladder and then climbing out. One of the overseers had loaded his whip and at every second Pollenport expected a missile to come hurtling at his head, but he reached the ground without incident, then turned and faced the masked figures with his hand resting on the butt of his revolver.

For nearly a minute no one moved and silence hung in the air like an invisible cloud. Then one of the overseers walked his mount forward a few paces and prodded Pollenport in the shoulder with his whip, using it as a man would use his walking-stick to prod an unknown object on the

seashore. Pollenport winced as the point of the whip pricked his flesh, but he stood his ground and drew the revolver. He realised that the overseer was testing him and, to show that he wasn't intimidated, raised the gun and fired into the air.

In that confined space the noise of the explosion was tremendous. It echoed from the surrounding cliffs and rolled along the defiles like miniature thunder, and the overseer hastily backed away. The slaves became restless and excited, and might have rushed upon Pollenport in a frenzy of adulation if two or three of the overseers hadn't galloped at them flourishing their whips and shouting.

Sam jumped from the rope ladder to Pollenport's side, and he was followed by Paul.

"You didn't wait long before starting something," said Paul. "But I guess you couldn't have done anything else."

"No," said Pollenport, and went on to remark that it was essential to maintain the idea that they were gods and not to be lightly provoked. "As long as we can do that I think we'll be comparatively safe," he said.

The overseers were clearing a gangway through the crowd. Van Eyck came to the space-travellers and indicated, with gestures, that they were to follow him. He led them towards the nearest cliff face and, as they approached it, they discovered that a broad river ran along its foot, concealed from them until now by the deep channel in which it flowed.

The water of the river was as black as molasses. It moved sluggishly, with wisps of thin vapour creeping over its surface, and after about a hundred yards it disappeared into the darkness of a tunnel. Rough steps led obliquely down to a landing-stage where a long and narrow raft was moored, and when Paul saw the raft he grinned nervously and muttered: "Somehow I wish we'd stopped in the Sky-~~line~~."

"I'm past that stage," said Sam. "I'm resigned to just

anything. If I come out of this lot alive I'll be more than surprised—I'll be astounded."

There were four slaves on the raft, one at each corner, elderly men in strange crimson garments that resembled children's rompers. Evidently this was a livery of sorts, and the men also wore white skull-caps, belts of black fur and pale blue hose; and in their hands they held long hooked poles.

Van Eyck shepherded the space-travellers down the steps and on to the raft, then one of the overseers dismounted and came swaggering to the landing-stage. He hesitated for a moment, eyeing Pollenport's revolver warily, then jumped on to the raft, and with a gesture ordered one of the slaves to cast off.

Fur rugs and woven mats covered the rough logs of the raft. Van Eyck sat himself down on one of the mats and indicated to the space-travellers that they would be wise to do the same—he pointed to the tunnel and then to their heads, and so made them understand they would meet with unpleasant consequences unless they sat down. The raft moved forward smoothly, with the slaves using their hooked poles partly as grappling irons and partly as punt poles, and as the raft neared the tunnel a heavy stillness settled over the Antigeosians crowding the bank as if this was the last they expected to see of their strange visitors.

"Ominous," murmured Paul.

"I daresay we'll survive," said Pollenport smiling, and at the same moment the shadow of the tunnel's mouth fell across the raft as a token of the darkness ahead.

Pollenport dabbled his hand in the river. It was warm, almost hot, and the vapour rising from the water had a faint reek of sulphur. . . .

PART II

UNDER THE VOLCANO

(i)

THE overseers detested the light. All of them, without exception, were albinos, and since they had no melanin in their skins to protect them from the sun's rays they avoided the light by swathing their bodies in robes until nothing was left exposed except their antennæ and their pink eyes; and they lived in the dark. Their chief habitation, running for miles under the volcanic hills, was a labyrinth of dark channels, passages and caves, illuminated only by flickering torches, and for long stretches not illuminated at all. The Antigeosians were not inconvenienced by darkness to the same extent as human beings, they had their extra sense to inform them of the relative positions of things and perhaps this was one of the reasons why the inhabitants of both continents had remained troglodytic.

That first journey into the habitation was an awe-inspiring experience for the men from the *Skylark*. For a long way the darkness was as absolute as if they had all been struck blind, and the silence was only broken by the lapping of the water against the rock walls and by faint ominous rumblings as if the roof were about to cave in. Once the raft disturbed some winged creature and for a moment the whirr of its wings echoed through the tunnel. Paul felt something brush his face, like an icy fingernail drawn across his cheek, and it was as much as he could do to keep from screaming.

"A bat?" he whispered.

"If so it was nothing like any terrestrial bat," said Pollenport. "It's wings made too much noise. Perhaps it was a bird. Or a large moth."

The echoes of his voice were tremendous. The tunnel boomed with them, and it seemed as if the raft were surrounded by mournful ghosts moaning, ". . . large moth . . . large moth . . ." until at last the words faded reluctantly into the silence.

Presently a wavering point of blue light pierced the darkness ahead. It proved to be a torch stuck in the tunnel's wall, and, although it burned with a cold and uncertain flame, it gave enough light for the space-travellers to get some idea of their surroundings. The river was now a broad flood of dark steaming water, and it was shallow, as Pollenport could see by watching the slaves' poles as they punted the raft along. Stalactites encrusted the tunnel's roof, and the ends of some of them dipped to within three or four feet of the water. Ahead, more points of light fluttered in the gloom, revealing the mouth of a low cavern where the tunnel's wall fell back to form a platform of rock.

This platform was crowded with Antigeosians, indistinctly seen as a mass of pale hairless bodies with the bluish light shimmering on them, and Paul muttered: "We're coming to a station. Overseer types, aren't they?"

"I think so," said Pollenport. "And they're naked."

The raft veered towards the platform and, for the first time, the space-travellers found themselves looking at the unmasked faces of the ruling caste; and what they saw was not encouraging. Blue light glinted in pink eyes and Paul thought of Neanderthal man, bleached and shaved. Jutting brows and lobeless ears were general, as also were loose, thin-lipped mouths flanked by pendulous cheeks, and the shapeless jaws kept up a tense nervous movement rather as if the overseers were all chewing gum. Metal belts like the ones worn by the clothed overseers encircled the flabby,

bulging waists, and hooked to each belt was a steel whip and bag of missiles.

"They all seem to be wounded or injured in some way," said Paul and, in fact, nowhere could he see an Antigeosian whose skin was not puckered by the scars of great gashes and stabs. Missing ears and fingers were common, and he saw at least three men who lacked noses.

"Yes, they're a battered lot," said Sam. "They look like tom-cats that have spent every night of their lives on the tiles."

The slaves eased the raft to the landing-stage, and the overseer who had accompanied it stepped off on to the platform. The space-travellers would have followed him, but the naked Antigeosians were now crowding the platform so thickly that this was impossible until Pollenport, acting on inspiration, suddenly whipped the torch from his haversack and flashed it in their faces. Immediately, they fell back in panic, yelping as if the beam of light had burnt them, and the space-travellers jumped ashore.

At first the Antigeosians kept their distance, lurking in the shadows at the back of the cavern, but Pollenport noticed that several of them had unhooked their steel whips and were holding them ready to attack. The clothed overseer pointed to Pollenport's revolver and, addressing the others in gestures, tried to warn them of its power, but he was brushed aside and his compatriots started to move towards Pollenport, creeping forward cautiously with their whips raised and pointing at his face.

It was curious the way they only took notice of Pollenport. Sam and Paul were ignored, and they glanced at each other anxiously, wondering what they should do. Van Eyck was near them, but he was as impassive as ever, watching the scene without the slightest trace of emotion.

Some of the Antigeosians were now within ten feet of Pollenport. He had his revolver in his hand, but clearly

he would have no chance once his attackers decided to rush him, and meanwhile he felt that if he fired into the air again it would be more likely to provoke an attack than anything else. The technique that had worked before would hardly work here. These Antigeosians were not merely a scattered handful of overseers amidst hundreds of slaves and women, and they looked unpleasantly resolute.

Sam drew his revolver. "I'm going to create a diversion," he whispered, and aiming the revolver at the river, fired it.

The result was dramatic, even to Paul who was expecting the explosion. Afterwards, he couldn't remember hearing the actual shot at all, only saw the flash and the fountain of spray thrown up by the bullet striking the water, and this was followed by a moment of absolute silence during which he glimpsed the bodies of the startled Antigeosians as motionless as figures in a photograph. Then back along the tunnel came the echo of the shot, a roar of appalling noise as if a train of fifty ten-ton trucks had hurtled into a powder-mill, and the walls of the cavern seemed to leap and tremble with the clatter. In the next instant Paul was engulfed by the Antigeosians as they ran for their lives. He was carried along in the rush and swept out of the cavern into a dark tunnel, shoved forward by cold soft bodies that exuded a dank fungoid smell as if they had been rubbed with rotting toad-stools.

He tried to get to the wall of the tunnel, intending to wait there until the stampede had passed, but he was too well embedded to be able to do anything except follow the Antigeosians, letting those behind overtake him one and two at a time. As he ran, he struggled to pull the torch from his haversack, and had just got it out when one of the creatures cannoned into him, knocking the torch out of his hand.

At last, after floundering through the darkness for what seemed like minutes, he found himself in the rear of the

Antigeosians, and stopped running. He leant against the tunnel's wall to get his breath back, and the darkness around him was so dense that it almost seemed to have substance and the power of suffocating him. He wiped the sweat from his face and noticed that the air he breathed was luke warm, and smelt of sulphur.

He leant there, listening. Only the steady drip of water somewhere close at hand, and a faint rumbling broke the silence. He wondered what had become of Pollenport and Sam, and decided they were probably still in the cavern by the river. He told himself that it should be possible for him to find his way back to them and, turning, started off through the darkness with his hands outstretched in front of him.

Twice he grazed his shoulder painfully against the wall, and the fear that he had missed his way began to haunt him. Panic struggled to break loose within him and, presently, as he took another step forward, the floor of the tunnel seemed to vanish. He felt himself falling into a void and clutched wildly at the air to save himself.

He landed with a thud that winded him and jarred every bone in his body. A minute or more passed before he dragged himself to his feet and then he realised, as his shoe struck a single deep step hewn out of the tunnel's floor, that he had fallen only a matter of eight or nine inches at most. But the presence of the step confirmed his worst suspicions—this wasn't the tunnel he had come along.

He was lost. Terror swirled through his consciousness, and he was assailed by stifling sensations of claustrophobia. He cupped his hands round his mouth and yelled: "Jonah! . . . Sam" and the darkness filled with spectral voices as his shouts came echoing back to him.

His yell was answered. He heard his name as a blurred fragment of sound which was at once caught up in its own echoes, so that it was impossible to tell distance or direction.

He shouted again, and was answered again, but the echoes multiplied endlessly, and for some seconds he was as lost amidst sound as he was amidst darkness, and the walls of rock.

When the echoes at last died away he started off along the tunnel once more, keeping close to the wall and testing the floor with his foot at each step. The tunnel was narrower now and more tortuous, and it was Paul's impression that it sloped gently upwards. A steady draught stirred the air, bringing with it a faint smell of smoke, and a little further on he began to hear sounds that suggested he was nearing the Antigeosians' living quarters.

The sounds were muffled and not easily definable. He heard a certain amount of tapping and scraping, and then a sharp crash as if someone had dropped an earthenware vessel; and presently he saw light glimmering in the darkness, and hurried towards it.

He slowed down as he neared the light, and found that its source was a small circular hole in the tunnel's wall. Steam or smoke was drifting through the hole, and he moved cautiously forward, squinting in his efforts to see what was beyond the smoke. Far below him fires were smouldering redly in what appeared to be long troughs, clouds of smoke hung in the air, but every now and then flames leapt up and gave Paul fleeting glimpses of a confused and busy scene. Women, wearing pale yellow kimonos and caps, were standing by the smouldering troughs stirring great earthenware cauldrons and turning long spits on which were stuck whole carcasses of small animals and birds. Other women were working at table-like slabs of rock, chopping vegetables, crushing seeds and herbs with a pestle and kneading huge lumps of a substance that might have been black dough. There were also a few slaves about, all wearing the romper-like livery and all elderly. Some carried wooden trays and he decided they must be waiters.

He had cheered up considerably on discovering this kitchen. His worst fear—that he might be lost for ever in a dark labyrinth of tunnels—vanished, and he set forth in search of other parts of the habitation, groping his way through the darkness and looking back from time to time at the faint light issuing from the aperture above the kitchen.

He came to a place where the wall on one side ended, falling away abruptly so that he was no longer in a tunnel but on a broad ledge of rock. Sixty or seventy feet beneath him dozens of torches flickered in the gloom, and he realised he was looking down into a vast cave, and he could just distinguish naked Antigeosians moving amidst the wavering shadows, all heading towards a point that was beyond his field of vision, at the cave's further end.

He went down on his hands and knees and crept forward cautiously, trying to discover a means of descending to the floor of the cave. . . .

(ii)

NO sooner had Sam fired the shot that stampeded the Antigeosians than he found himself in danger of being pushed into the river by the rush. He caught a glimpse through the half-light of Paul struggling in the midst of a mob of naked overseers, but at that moment all idea of going to the rescue was out of the question, because Sam was entirely preoccupied with keeping the creatures away from him—mainly by punching them with his fists and kicking at their legs.

Van Eyck jumped back on to the raft for safety, and Pollenport evidently did not see what happened to Paul. Anyway, as soon as the confusion ebbed and while the last reverberations of the explosion still echoed in the tunnel, he asked: "Where's Paul?"

Sam explained, and Pollenport said: "Oh, well, they won't take him with them far. He'll extricate himself and come back to us here. We'd better wait for him."

"And then shall we go back to the *Skylark*?" Sam asked, and glanced down at the four slaves huddling together on the raft. "After all, we can easily force those chaps to take us back. By now they've got a proper respect for firearms."

"Well, I think anything in the way of a retreat would be a mistake," said Pollenport. "We've already established something of an ascendancy over the ruling caste, and now we should follow it up."

"You mean, beard them in their den?" said Sam, jerking his thumb towards the tunnel along which the overseers had fled.

"Yes."

Sam looked dubious. "If we go in there, I don't see us coming out again in a hurry," he muttered. "I think we should go back to the *Skylark* and make it our base. That's where the stores are, and everything."

"Including the tea?" said Pollenport, with a smile. "No, Sam, I'm convinced we should go at least a little further."

A muffled shout came to them from the tunnel. "Listen!" cried Sam. "That's Paul . . ."

Pollenport bellowed Paul's name in reply, and a moment later they heard another shout. Then there was silence, even though Pollenport shouted again, and Sam exclaimed: "Come on, Jonah! He may be in difficulties . . ."

"Van Eyck had better lead," said Pollenport, and the man in the big hat seemed to understand what was required of him. He stepped from the raft and led the way into the tunnel, walking fairly fast, and the space-travellers followed, shining the beams of their torches along the tunnel's floor.

"Try to memorise any turnings we take," said Pollenport, but Sam had had a better idea, and as they went forward, he

scratched a continuous line along the tunnel's wall with the foresight of his revolver.

Pollenport's foot touched something that rolled away and, when he shone the light on it, he was surprised to find that it was a torch. "Hullo, here's Paul's torch," he said, picking it up. "Now I suppose he's lost himself."

"Well, why doesn't he go on shouting until we find him?" Sam asked.

"God knows," said Pollenport, and the possibility of oubliettes and similar devices came into his mind. It was a horrifying idea and one that couldn't be entirely dismissed. In fact, oubliettes were all too likely to be in line with the ruling caste's sense of humour, and the idea of Paul falling into one made Pollenport break out in a cold sweat, but he said nothing to Sam, and meanwhile tried to get the idea out of his thoughts.

"The tunnel's getting wider," said Sam presently, and a few moments later it opened out into a cavern so immense that no first impressions could do justice to its size. All its forepart was in darkness, but a furlong away, across a floor strewn with boulders and forested with the stumps of stalagmites, a great bonfire blazed, and the bluish flames of hundreds of torches fluttered against the blackness beyond.

The floor became smoother as they advanced into the cave, until they came to a part, roughly circular, that was as smooth as ice and as black as pitch, and then the torches were flaring all around them, and they were within fifty yards of the bonfire. Van Eyck stopped when they reached this place, and glanced at the space-travellers a little uncertainly as if the next move lay with them, and it wasn't until then that Pollenport realised that the far end of the cavern was packed with thousands of Antigiosians.

They had their backs to the space-travellers, and they stood there almost motionless with their heads lifted towards the gloom and their forearms across their eyes. As far as

Pollenport could see, they were all of the ruling caste and some minutes passed before he could make out what it was that so held their attention. He peered into the semi-darkness and could distinguish nothing except a few great blocks and slabs of rock piled one on the other.

"It's an idol, isn't it?" Sam whispered, and then Pollenport realised that, at a pinch, the rock formation could be taken to represent the figure of a man, scated and leaning back. The torso was a great rectangular slab of rock, with a large boulder resting on it, and this, Pollenport supposed, was the idol's head; and in front were two rough stone pillars which might be taken for knees and legs.

Then he noticed that standing between the idol's knees was a man of Van Eyck's race, similarly dressed and wearing the all-important hat. He looked no larger than a doll between those immense chunks of rock, and his hands moved ceaselessly, producing an interminable series of gesticulations as if he were making a speech or reciting a prayer.

"I think we'd better assert ourselves," said Pollenport, and his hand closed over the butt of his revolver. "You can whistle on your fingers, can't you?"

Sam gave him a startled glance. "Well—yes . . ."

"Go ahead, then, Sam."

Sam looked slightly shocked, but he obeyed. He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled vehemently, producing a single shrill note that echoed from the walls and reverberated among the stalactites in the roof until the whole of that voluminous cavern was filled with an ear-splitting din.

The Antigeosians swung round, moving almost as one man, and firelight glinted on steel as they unhooked their whips from their belts. Pollenport strode forward a few steps and stood there, holding the revolver and scowling. Afterwards he was to remember those few seconds as the

most nerve-racking of his life, and at each of them he expected the overseers to rush forward and make an end of him.

Yet not a man moved. The creatures simply stayed where they were, with the flames reflecting in their red eyes, and their eyes on the revolver in Pollenport's hand; and behind them the man standing between the idol's legs kept up his ceaseless gesticulations unheeded.

One of the Antigiosians was wearing a broader, more gorgeous belt than the others, and on his head was a narrow circlet of gold. Pollenport decided that this man was of higher rank and, pointing the revolver at him, he beckoned to him to come forward.

He was an ugly-looking brute, this overlord. He had the face of a dissolute bulldog, one of his antennæ was missing, and his nose and mouth were dragged to one side of his face by a hideous scar that ran down his cheek. At first he took no notice of Pollenport's signs, but several of the overseers near him spoke to him in gestures, evidently pleading with him, and finally he moved forward, eyeing Pollenport warily.

He still had his steel whip in his hand, but, when Pollenport aimed the revolver at it, he hastily hung it on his belt. Then suddenly, when he was within a couple of yards of Pollenport, he lost his nerve and stopped in his tracks, flinging a forearm across his eyes and bowing his head.

Behind him there was a ripple of movement as the other overseers followed suit, and Pollenport glanced at Sam. "We're winning," he muttered. "But what the deuce do we do next?"

"There's a sort of throne over there," said Sam. "Let's go and sit on it," and he pointed to a stone bench lavishly draped with furs and silks. It stood on the edge of polished floor and, although there were other stone benches there, this was the only one that was draped.

‘We’ll be taking a risk,’ Pollenport murmured. “But—come on.”

They strolled nonchalantly across to the bench and sat down on it as if it was the only place fit for them to sit. The overseers still stood with their eyes covered and, behind them, the man on the idol still continued his interminable gesticulations. . . .

(iii)

PAUL, perched on the ledge of rock a hundred feet above the floor of the cavern, saw Pollenport and Sam enter the place. At least he saw the beams of their torches, and sensations of relief surged through him like a flood. His instinct was to shout to his friends, but on second thoughts he realised that might not be wise. It would be better if he could find a way down into the cavern and then get to them unobtrusively.

He noticed that they had Van Eyck with them, which was a good sign, and he saw that they were going towards the far end of the cave, where he knew there were Antigeosians, although he couldn’t see what they were doing. Stalactites obstructed his view, and all the distant part of the cave was hidden from him. He could see nothing of it except a few dozen flickering torches and the reflection of firelight.

He waited until Pollenport and Sam were out of sight and then crept further along the ledge, still going on his hands and knees. The wall of the cavern beneath the ledge was not quite sheer, and it was rugged enough to make him think that he could climb down it if only the light were better. The trouble was that although the lower stretches of the wall were illuminated by a certain amount of light the upper parts were so deep in shadow that he could not make out possible footholds, and when he came to a place that

seemed particularly promising he decided to take the risk of striking a match.

The matches were in his haversack and he had to stand up to get at them. He struck one and the flame fluttered for a second, and went out. He swore under his breath, and struck another. This match also went out at once and then he realised that a steady draught was blowing across the ridge.

He tried to make out where it was coming from, and after a few moments traced it to a narrow cleft in the rock behind him, a little to his left. He moved towards it, peering through the shadows, and he felt cool air caressing his face.

Then suddenly a hand darted from the shadows and caught him by the throat. Sharp fingers closed round his wind-pipe and, choking, he was unable to cry out before another hand was clapped over his mouth.

Paul was sinewy and in good condition, but he was no match for his attacker. He tried to get at his revolver, but his assailant was too quick and powerful for him—he simply forced Paul against the rock so that his right arm was jammed immovably to his side.

So far Paul had hardly had time to feel frightened, but now, with red darkness swimming behind his eyes and blood pumping in his ears, he knew that his enemy meant to kill him. And he felt that his only chance of saving himself was to relax for the two or three minutes of consciousness that still remained to him, and then suddenly to launch a desperate attack, kicking, biting and struggling.

He let himself go limp, and the grip on his throat tightened. His antagonist was dragging him deeper into the cleft in the rock, his heels were dragging over the rough floor, and he felt as if his head was being wrenched from his body. The pain of it destroyed his control, he lashed out with all the strength he had left and drove his elbow into his attacker's belly.

He heard a noise between a gasp and a groan, and momentarily the grip on his wind-pipe eased. He jerked his throat free, and tried to dash from the other's grasp, but the fellow was too quick for him and, although he had to let go of Paul's throat, he managed to grab him by the hair.

Then Paul, struggling to breathe, became conscious of a change in the other man's behaviour, his movements became a shade gentler and Paul realised that he wasn't going to be killed—at least, not immediately. The woolly texture of Paul's hair had puzzled his assailant, and now he passed a hand over his head and discovered the absence of antennæ. He reacted sharply and the next thing Paul knew was that he was being helped, almost tenderly, along a narrow passage through the rock.

There was a small dimly-lighted cave at the end of the passage, unoccupied except by a naked child of about five. He was sitting on a pile of ragged blankets, looking rather scared until the man who had attacked Paul gestured to him. Then he jumped up and poured some water from a stone pitcher into a small bowl.

The man pointed to the blankets and indicated that Paul was to sit down, then he took the bowl from the child and held it to Paul's lips. The water was cool and fresh, and Paul drank it gratefully, even although his bruised throat made swallowing difficult and painful. The little boy came and looked on, and Paul was surprised to see that he was of Van Eyck's race, with lively green eyes, dark hair and a bronze skin.

Yet the man was certainly a slave. There could be no doubt about that for his head still bore the scars where a clamp had once chafed, but he was better nourished and better dressed than any clamped helot that Paul had hitherto seen. He was a stockily-built young man of about twenty, and he wore a sarong-like garment of a gay silken material

similar to that used by the women for their kimonos. He was taller than most of the slaves, but he had the same narrow head, slate-grey skin and sparse hair.

Paul looked about him and, in spite of the poor light, saw plenty of evidence to suggest that his hosts lived permanently in the cave. There were several dishes and bowls on the floor, as well as a second heap of blankets, and there was a complicated device of coloured balls strung on wooden rods which had him puzzled until he realised it was a toy.

A thing that surprised him was the air's freshness. It had no trace of the smoky sulphurous smell that had troubled his nostrils ever since he'd first entered the habitation, and then he discovered that the rock behind him was pierced by a large oblique hole. Apparently this hole led directly out into the open air and, in fact, when he put his head down and looked up, he was just able to make out a fragment of the evening sky, streaked with sombre clouds. The opening, which was about seven feet above the floor, was large enough for a man to crawl through and he made a note of it as a possible way of escape.

A slight noise caused him to look round, and he discovered that the slave was engaged in lifting a great slab of rock that had been lying on the floor of the cave just in front of the entrance. Paul estimated that it must weigh at least a quarter of a ton, and his respect for the slave's strength was considerably increased as he watched him raise the rock and lean it against the cave's mouth, where it formed a door.

Meanwhile the little boy busied himself arranging a number of objects on the cave's floor—an unlighted torch, some tinder and two pieces of metal which Paul recognised as the fragments of a slave's head-clamp. Preparations were obviously being made to settle down for the night, and this was confirmed when the slave clambered up the wall behind Paul and rolled a large boulder along

a ledge in front of the opening, so that it exactly covered the hole, excluding the last stray rays of light.

The slave jumped down and then came the clink of metal against metal, and Paul saw red sparks falling on to the little heap of tinder. It occurred to him that he could accelerate the process of lighting the torch by simply striking a match, but he felt that this would frighten his companions so he waited patiently until at last the torch was alight, and burning with a clear blue flame.

The slave placed the torch in a socket in the wall, then came and sat on the pile of blankets. He stared Paul full in the face, and moved his hands in a series of slow emphatic gestures as if he realised that Paul was a foreigner, but thought he could make him understand.

Paul shook his head, and pointed to his brow to indicate his lack of antennæ, but apparently the slave did not consider this an insurmountable difficulty. Anyway, he repeated his gestures, this time even more slowly and with greater emphasis, and it occurred to Paul that the slave merely considered him deformed. There were no doubt some Antigeosians who were born without antennæ, just as some terrestrial people were born blind or deaf and dumb, and it was likely that the antennæ-less Antigeosians learnt to read their compatriot's gestures visually—which would explain the slave's persistence.

So Paul shook his head again and pointed to his mouth. "Listen," he said, aloud, "I don't wiggle, I talk. And if you and I are to understand each other you'll have to learn to talk, too."

The slave simply looked blank, and the little boy giggled. He was kneeling on the floor watching Paul with every sign of intense admiration. "And you," said Paul, "you'll have to learn to talk as well."

The child was delighted and moved his lips in imitation of Paul.

"That's the idea," Paul assured him. "But you must make some noises at the same time."

The small boy laughed and got up. He came and leant against Paul's knee, gazing at his mouth.

"Now, watch," said Paul. "Move your lips, flap your tongue and try out some noises. Like this—*a—e—i—u!*"

The child was beside himself with delight and almost fell over in his excitement. Moreover, he even seemed to understand what Paul was getting at for he opened his mouth and wriggled his tongue about.

"Uh," he said, at last, after considerable effort.

"That's a step in the right direction," Paul murmured. "Tell me, what have you done with your big hat?" and he passed a hand round the child's head to suggest a hat.

The boy suddenly became serious, and glanced anxiously from Paul to the slave.

"Yes, your big hat," said Paul, and went through the motions of putting a hat on his head.

The child gave a scream and tore himself away. He ran to the slave and cowered against him, sobbing with terror.

Bewildered, Paul tried to show the slave that he was sorry, but the man ignored him. The torchlight glinted coldly in his whiteless eyes and he gave all his attention to the child, bending over him and caressing his hair to soothe him. An ineffable sadness filled the cave, reminding Paul of the sadness that settled on coloured folks' homes when the talk turned to Jim Crowism and lynchings.

He supposed that the man was a runaway slave, but he could think of no reason why he should have a small boy with him. And what was the significance of the big hats? Why were they taboo? And why did the slave and the child elect to live right in the heart of the overlords' habitation? How did they manage for food and water?

These questions, and others on the same subjects, crowded Paul's mind, and, of course, with so little data to go on, he

could think of no satisfactory answers. He glanced at his two companions from time to time, hoping for a chance to make peace, but they took no notice of his overtures; and, presently, when the child had calmed down, the slave lifted him and carried him across to the other pile of blankets.

The boy fell asleep almost at once, and the slave squatted on the floor at his bedside. Paul noticed that he had a small piece of wood in his hands and he was carving at it with a knife. Apparently, he was making a toy for the child, and the piece of wood was gradually taking on some resemblance to a four-footed animal like the ones ridden by the overseers. The knife the slave was using was not made of metal, but of flint or black glass.

Paul was tired, but he forced himself to keep awake. The slave's attitude to him was coldly inimical, and he didn't like the look of that little black-bladed knife. On the other hand, he couldn't keep awake indefinitely, so he felt his best course would be to try and persuade the slave that he wasn't an enemy. He thought about the bar of chocolate in his haversack, and wondered if it would be a tactical error to offer it to the slave. The North Antigeosians had liked chocolate, but the slave might suspect Paul of trying to poison him.

He was still considering the matter when he heard a faint tapping. The slave jumped up and went to the slab of rock that covered the mouth of the cave and, heaving at it, shifted it back a few inches. Then, to Paul's amazement, a woman squeezed her way into the cave—a woman of about forty, wearing a yellow kimono and carrying a small lidded pot like a casserole.

When she saw Paul she gave a squeak of astonishment and nearly dropped the casserole. The slave replaced the slab of rock and came to the woman, gesticulating rapidly—obviously explaining how Paul came to be in the cave. It struck Paul that the woman was a little impatient of the

slave's explanation, for after a moment or two, she thrust the casserole into his hands, and came and sat on the blankets at Paul's side.

She had a strong intelligent face, and she reminded Paul of several North Antigeon women he had known. She could easily have been a North Antigeonian, and the defeated look that Paul had seen on the faces of so many of the women of this southern continent had passed her by completely. She looked resolute and courageous, as if nothing short of death could defeat her.

She studied Paul for a few moments and then leant forward and drew something with her finger on the floor of the cave—a circle with a line under it. She pointed to Paul and then to the invisible drawing, and he realised that what she had drawn was meant to represent the *Skylark* on its sled. She was asking him if he had come from the *Skylark*.

He smiled his affirmation, and then she made circles with her thumbs and first fingers and held them over her eyes to suggest spectacles. This puzzled Paul momentarily until it occurred to him that Pollenport was the only member of the spaceship's crew to wear spectacles. No doubt the woman was asking what had become of him.

Paul pointed to the mouth of the cave and, at the same time, shrugged, trying to convey to the woman that he had last seen Pollenport in the great hall, but did not know what had become of him since. Perhaps she understood him, for she became very serious, then lifted the hem of her loose skirt and placed it over the lower part of her face like a vizor, following the gesture with an expression of disgust, and Paul understood that she was trying to tell him that the overseers were wicked men and not to be trusted.

Meanwhile the slave had opened the casserole and was using a little wooden spade to ladle the food into two bowls. A savoury smell filled the cave, and Paul noticed that the food consisted of lumps of meat floating in a rich red gravy,

with diced vegetables and dumpling. The slave went to an earthenware jar standing in a corner and took from it two chunks of very dark bread or cake.

The woman glanced at Paul and pointed to the food then to his mouth, clearly asking him if he were hungry. However, since there was barely enough food there for the slave and the child, he shook his head and tapped his haversack to indicate that he had some food with him. He was amused to notice that the woman seemed rather relieved.

She left him, and went and sat on the child's bed. She stroked the little boy's face and gently tugged his curls to wake him up, and Paul wondered if she were the boy's mother. In fact, judging by the tender way in which she gazed at the child, he felt almost certain that she was, and he wondered why the boy had to live hidden away in this miserable cave with only the slave for companionship. And, thinking about the matter, he had a sense of a community governed by lunatic laws—a community in which no male of the green-eyed, brown-skinned species was suffered to exist unless he was the owner of one of the ridiculous hats.

It was several minutes before the little boy was properly awake. He stretched and yawned innumerable times, and the woman looked across at Paul and smiled. Evidently she was anxious for Paul to know that the child was her son, and her next gesture made this clear—she pointed first to her lower stomach, then to the little boy and finally to her breasts, indicating that the child was the fruit of her womb, she had suckled him and brought him up.

Paul was doing his best to encompass the words: "Fine child," in a gesture, when the woman confused him by pointing to the slave, and then repeating the same gestures she had used before.

Paul stared at her in bewilderment, and thought: "I must have misunderstood her the first time." Obviously, the slave couldn't be her son as well. He was of a different

species. Surely he couldn't be the brother, or even the half-brother of the little boy on the bed?

Yet the woman seemed insistent. She repeated the gestures with even greater emphasis, and Paul gave it up. Perhaps she simply meant that she had adopted the slave or that she treated him as a son. Paul remembered vaguely reading of certain terrestrial tribes in which blood-kinship with animals of various species was effected by means of magical ritual and formulæ, and he supposed this present case was an instance of a similar belief.

He watched the woman giving the little boy his supper, and decided that his first idea was the right one—she was the child's mother, and she had borne him without the overseer's knowledge or consent. She had had to hide the baby, and so she had found this cave. She had needed help, and so she had freed one of the slaves to look after the child. The yellow kimono suggested that she worked in the great kitchens that he had seen from the tunnel, and so the feeding of the slave and the child had presented few difficulties, although the risk must have been tremendous and constant. The woman couldn't expect any very gentle treatment from the overseers if they discovered her crimes. Undeniably she was a woman of determination and limitless pluck.

The little boy wasn't hungry. He pushed the bowl away from him after half a dozen mouthfuls, and sleepily burrowed his way back into the blankets. His mother tucked him up, and then spent some minutes in gesture-conversation with the slave. By their frequent glances in Paul's direction, he guessed they were discussing what was to be done about him, and presently the woman came to him and again drew her symbol for the *Skyark* on the floor of the cave.

Then she took Paul's hand and pointed to the opening in the rock behind him, and he realised she was offering to take him back to the spaceship. For a few moments he felt reluctant to fall in with her plan, because by temperament

he was against anything in the nature of a retreat; but a little reflection convinced him it was the wisest course. He couldn't, in fairness, expect to remain in the cave indefinitely, and, if he left it by the way he had come, his chances of finding Pollenport and Sam were slender. On the other hand, if he returned to the *Skylark*, there was every chance that the other space-travellers would come back and find him there sooner or later.

He rose, and the slave climbed up to the opening and rolled the boulder away from its mouth. Paul helped the woman to get on to the ledge and she wriggled adroitly into the hole, as if she had been that way often enough before. Paul followed her, and found himself in a dark tunnel with a glimpse of moonlight ahead.

Cold damp air caressed his face, and he emerged from the tunnel into a clump of thornless bushes. The woman helped him to his feet, and then he saw that he was on a hillside with a mist-filled valley beneath. Both the Antigean moons hung in the sky, one directly overhead and the other just above the horizon, making the night half as bright as day, and beyond the shoulder of the hill Paul could see the volcano with white smoke drifting from its crater.

The woman caught his hand, and started down the hillside, moving quickly as if she were in terror of being seen. . . .

(iv)

THE scene in the great cavern had the texture of a nightmare. The silence of the overseers, conversing with each other only in gestures, was unnerving, and the huge idol brooded over the silence like the threat of doom. Pollenport no longer saw the idol simply as a fortuitous arrangement of rocks. It had become an entity, a symbol of evil, and almost something to be feared in itself.

"You'd think he'd get tired," Sam whispered.

"Who?"

"The priest or whatever he is," said Sam. "The chap standing up there waving his hands about. Nobody's paying any attention to him."

The overseers had withdrawn from the vicinity of the idol. Now they were all crowding round the smooth patch of floor. Some were still standing, others reclined on rugs and a few—those that wore circlets and the gaudier belts—sat on the stone benches, and the interested gaze of all of them was focused upon Pollenport and Sam.

Servile slaves, all wearing the ridiculous red rompers, hurled logs on to the bonfire until its flames blazed fifty feet up into the cavern's roof; and the firelight's reflections galloped along the walls and glinted on the stalactites that hung down through the smoke clouds like fantastic icicles. Other slaves, twenty or thirty of them, came running in, bearing trays heaped with food, and Sam glanced at Pollenport uneasily.

"I'm not much of a one for foreign food," said Sam. "We don't have to try it, do we?"

"No," Pollenport assured him. "I don't suppose they would try and poison us the first night, but we don't want to establish a precedent. We'll have to make them understand that we eat only our own sort of food."

The slaves came to them first, and the space-travellers found themselves confronted by an unappetising choice of greasy stews, mashed vegetables and broken meats, including one particular abomination that was to haunt Sam's thoughts on and off for many days to come—a dish that consisted almost entirely of the eyes of small mammalia, boiled and garnished with herbs.

Pollenport assumed his sternest expression and held up an imperious hand, but the slaves did not understand this as a refusal and even when he waved them away they simply

pressed closer round him, thrusting their nauseous offerings under his nose.

He recoiled and hastily produced two small packets of biscuits from his haversack. He handed one to Sam and opened the other, and at last it dawned on the slaves—as Pollenport started to nibble austerely at a water biscuit—that he did not eat their sort of food.

The slaves retreated, and offered the food to the overseers, who filled great wooden trenchers with the stuff and then ate like drunken monkeys, slobbering the food over their faces in their hurry to get it into their mouths. Van Eyck, however, seemed to share the space-travellers' opinion of the repast, for he ate nothing but fruit, delicately peeling it with a small silver knife.

The end of the meal was marked by a curious little incident. When the slaves had cleared away the dishes and trenchers, and then had gone round from overseer to overseer carefully wiping hands and faces with scarlet napkins, Van Eyck suddenly rose and glanced at the space-travellers expectantly.

"I think he means us to get up, too," said Sam. "Perhaps he's going to take us back to the *Skylark*."

He half rose, but at that moment four or five of the overseers shouted: "Yuh! Yuh!" and came storming across the smooth patch of floor. Their anger was directed at Van Eyck and they addressed him in furious gestures while he stood in front of them in an attitude of impassive submission that was not without an element of contempt.

The scene interested Pollenport. It was the first time he had seen any of the overseers get angry with Van Eyck, and even now there was something of restraint in their behaviour—as if, when it came to it, they were more afraid of him than he was of them.

"What do you make of it?" Sam asked.

"I imagine the overseers don't want Van Eyck to take us

away," said Pollenport. "Perhaps they're going to stage some special entertainment for us or something."

The overseers' anger abated quickly. They permitted Van Lyck to leave and, as he turned away, there was a shade more expression in his face than usual; and in the glance he threw Pollenport there was something of either sympathy or pity. Had Pollenport seen the same expression on an Englishman's face he would have interpreted it as: "I little do you know what you are in for. . . ."

More torches were brought in. The place was still not brightly lit by terrestrial standards, but at least there was now enough light for Pollenport to be able to see the opposite wall quite clearly, and he noticed that it was decorated with more of those symbols that he had come to accept as the characters of a written language. In fact, it looked as if an entire saga had been carved into the rock, for the hieroglyphs covered the whole wall from floor to ceiling and ran back into the cave until they were lost among the smoky shadows. Traces of colour clung to the outlines, suggesting they had once been painted, but generations of smoke had dimmed the pigments' brilliance and the inscription was clogged by ancient accretions of soot.

"There's a breathless hush in the close tonight," Sam whispered, and then Pollenport realised that a heavy stillness had settled over the Antigeosians. They no longer gesticulated among themselves, but simply sat alert and expectant, all gazing in one direction into the cavern's shadowed recesses. Presently Pollenport glimpsed movement among the shadows and in the same instant the overseers rose, stood motionless for a second, then bowed their heads and placed their forearms across their eyes; and into the area of light there emerged a scarlet-lacquered palanquin borne by four girls dressed in green-and-gold kimonos. The occupant of the palanquin seemed at first to be no more than a bundle of black cloth, but as the little procession came

nearer, this bundle resolved itself into the form of an old woman, with a yellow wrinkled face just discernible amongst the shadows of the cowl she wore. Pollenport noticed that the cowl was held in place by a broad band of gold, probably of great antiquity, crudely wrought and set with uncut jewels; and, as the palanquin turned, he caught a glimpse of pink eyes, lustreless and half-closed, and so was able to decide that the woman belonged to the ruling caste.

"Good God, they're bringing her to this bench," Sam muttered urgently. "Shall we get up?"

Pollenport hesitated. Some of the overseers were glaring at him from under their forearms, and a few of them had their hands on the hilts of their whips.

"Yes," he murmured at length. "We'll get up, but let's be leisurely about it. Make it look as if we're conferring a favour."

The girls brought the palanquin to within about ten paces of the draped bench, and Pollenport and Sam rose unhurriedly and moved away. The overseers, still standing with their eyes covered, edged back uneasily as the space-travellers advanced, and Pollenport took the opportunity to sit down on one of the vacant stone benches, where Sam joined him.

The girls had lifted the old woman out of the palanquin and were carrying her sedately towards the draped bench. They settled her, tucking cushions round her, and one of the girls fetched a curiously-shaped gilt casket. It was peculiarly long and narrow, and she placed it at the old woman's side. Then all four girls retired, taking the palanquin with them.

The old woman seemed hardly conscious. She sat amidst the cushions as if stuffed, with her mouth open and her eyes closed and, although she was obviously a person of consequence, it struck Pollenport that she had no more presence or dignity than the old crones he had seen a few days

previously on the seashore. Indeed, she was very like them.

Suddenly the overseers dropped their arms and drew their whips. Momentarily they gazed towards the throne, then—and this was surprising in a people who normally disdained their vocal chords as a means of expression—yelled in unison something that sounded like: “Yuh! Ulliquot! Yuh!” and flung the steel whips towards the stalactites, catching them adroitly as they fell.

Two albino youths, naked and without belts, suddenly appeared from nowhere, bounding side by side into the ring formed by the host of overseers. They perfunctorily saluted the throne with their arms across their eyes, then sprang apart, crouching and circling round each other; and Pollenport noticed that they were armed with vicious-looking short-bladed daggers, one in each hand.

“Cripes, they’ll kill each other!” exclaimed Sam.

“That’s probably the idea,” said Pollenport, “and unfortunately there’s nothing we can do about it.”

The youngsters continued to circle round each other, wary and reluctant to join battle, and Sam noticed that one of them was lacking half an ear, while the bodies of both bore numerous scabs and scars. “Well, they look as if they’ve survived other fights,” he said, “so perhaps they’ll survive this one. What are their daggers made of? Glass?”

“Obsidian, I expect,” Pollenport told him. “It’s extremely brittle, so it may be that the fight stops when all the blades have been shattered.”

The youths still showed no eagerness to attack, and the overseers were getting impatient. One or two raised their whips and tried to prick the boys as they weaved round each other. Presently one succeeded and, as the youth who had been pricked swung round, the other attacked, striking at his opponent’s heart, and hoping to end the combat with a single blow.

He failed and the youth he was attacking defended him-

self neatly by side-stepping and warding off the blow with his forearm against the flat of the dagger's blade. It snapped off short and its owner in his dismay lost control of himself and lashed out wildly with his other dagger. Again his opponent side-stepped and this time raised a knee which caught the other in the stomach, half-winding him.

The overseers looked on motionless and disapproving. They wanted blood, and so far, although the combatants had been in the ring for several minutes, no blood had been shed. Pollenport found this slow uncertain beginning particularly horrible. It threw into relief the contrast between the youths' reluctance to fight and the bloodthirstiness of the overseers; and it gave him time to develop some feeling of sympathy for the combatants. True, they were themselves members of the debased ruling caste, and no more prepossessing than many of the overseers, but there was something about them—a faint resemblance to terrestrial teen-agers, perhaps—that aroused Pollenport's pity and made him feel ashamed to have to look on helplessly.

Then suddenly the tempo changed. One of the youths slashed the other's shoulder, blood flowed and at the sight of it the combatants seemed to go mad. The overseers roared: "Yuh! Yuh!" exultantly and the youths started to strike and lunge at each other in a storm of frenzied terror. Panting and gasping, they attacked like tigers, stabbing, slashing and hacking until blood from the wounds mottled the pallor of their albino bodies.

Pollenport threw a glance towards the old woman to see how she was taking it. She was asleep. She was sagging sideways against the cushions with her mouth wider open than ever and the gold band round her head had slipped forward, pressing the cowl crookedly over her face.

Another dagger snapped, and it took Pollenport a few seconds to realise that it belonged to the youth who had already lost one dagger.

"This will finish it," he muttered to Sam, but he was wrong. The youth that had been disarmed gave a tremendous roar and flung himself at his opponent, threw his arms around him so that the other's arms were pressed to his side. The attacker sank his teeth into his antagonist's throat and for more than a minute the pair grappled with each other, struggling and swaying, slipping and slithering on a floor that was greasy with blood.

The youth that still had his daggers got an arm free. The breath was rattling and snoring in his throat, but he was still conscious, and the torchlight glittered on the blade as he raised it to strike. The other, intent on biting the life out of his enemy, was unaware of his danger and he was within an instant of death when they fell, hitting the floor with a thud that echoed round the cavern like the beat of a muffled drum.

Loss of blood was beginning to tell on both of them. All the venom had gone out of the fight. Movements became sluggish and as the exhausted creatures wrestled, rolling to and fro on the floor, it occurred to Pollenport that each was now more intent on saving his life than on killing his opponent. In fact, if it hadn't been for the overseers, the fight would have petered out.

The end was so horrible that Pollenport felt he had lost all touch with reality. As he watched the youths floundering about, crawling on all fours, too weak to stand up, he felt he was living a dream that only differed from a nightmare in that he himself was not immediately involved. The overseers were in a frenzy, baying like hounds, but all heart had left the youths, and even the one who was still armed was too dazed to make use of his advantage. Slithering in blood, he tried to get out of the ring, but the overseers forced him back with their whips, and at last he collapsed, pitching forward on to his face as if in his despair he were trying to drive his head into the rock. Then he rolled over on to his back, with bubbles of blood forming at his nose and mouth,

and the overseers hurled gesticulated advice at his opponent on how to finish him off.

The survivor had just enough sense left to know what was required of him. His movements, as he dragged himself on all fours towards his fallen enemy, had all the inevitability of slow motion and whole minutes passed while he struggled to get the dagger from his victim's unresisting hand. At last he got it, and with the last vestige of his strength drove it into the other's throat. . . .

The overseers roared and flourished their whips. Slaves came running into the ring carrying wooden buckets of water, and the dead youth was dragged off by his heels with no more ceremony than would have been given to a pig's carcase. One of the slaves threw a bucket of water over the victor and helped him to his feet, and the old woman suddenly woke up and yawned.

The overlord with the missing antennæ went to the old woman. He put the gilt casket on her lap and opened it for her, and her withered hands wavered mechanically above it, feebly gesturing an invocation. Then, from the casket, the overlord lifted a belt from which hung a steel whip and a bag of missiles.

Two slaves had to hold the victorious youth upright while the overlord buckled the belt round his waist. The lad's head was on his chest, and he was at the end of his tether, too exhausted to have any sense of the honour he had gained, and too weary even to salute the old woman before he staggered out of the cavern, supported by the slaves.

Sam was white as paper, and his hands were trembling visibly. "I wonder how much of that sort of thing goes on," he murmured.

"A lot," said Pollenport, "judging by the way the overseers are hacked about. Still, there's no need for us to feel self-righteous—we still kill each other for nothing, and in even more horrible ways."

"Yes, but we don't have a lot of overseers around us, making out it's fun."

"Don't we? I'm not so sure."

Slaves were swabbing the blood from the ring, and a certain formality had come over the overseers. All were standing facing the idol, gazing up at the priest who was still gesticulating between the idol's knees. Pollenport looked up and saw that the man was moving slowly forward, descending a flight of steps hidden amongst the shadows that lurked between those colossal legs.

The man in the hat did not stop when he reached the floor of the cave, but came relentlessly on, past the bonfire and towards the crowd of overseers and as he advanced his gesticulations became more deliberate and more emphatic.

The host of overseers parted to let him through. He slow-marched past them, gazing straight in front of him, and now his gestures were so forceful that Pollenport wondered he had the energy to make them after so many hours of perpetual gesticulation.

He stalked out into the ring and halted, his hands thrashed the air in one final convulsive gesture and then dropped to his sides. He turned and faced the idol, staggering a little from weariness, and at the same moment another man in a Van Eyck hat strode into the ring.

He also stood facing the idol, then raised his hands to chest level and started gesticulating. His gestures were lively and brisk, and after a minute or so he moved forward at a jog-trot, past the overseers, past the bonfire and then, almost running, ascended the flight of steps between the idol's knees until he reached the stone platform at the top. then, still gesticulating, he turned and faced the cavern.

The four girls in their green-and-gold kimonos came back carrying the scarlet litter. The overseers saluted the old woman, then the girls lifted her up and placed her—almost perfunctorily, Pollenport thought—into the palanquin.

The overseers relaxed as the little cortege departed. They returned to their rugs and benches; and the space-travellers had the impression that ceremonial was finished with for the night. "Let's go back to the draped bench," said Pollenport. "These fellows are beginning to take us for granted . . .".

(v)

HE was right, and, in fact, the overseers' lack of curiosity regarding the space-travellers was remarkable. Their first excitement evaporated quickly, and once they had come to the conclusion that Pollenport offered no immediate threat to their way of life they lost interest and resumed the normal pattern of their existence. They were too stupid to be curious, and their interests were severely limited by the conditions under which they lived.

What struck Pollenport most of all was the sheer poverty of the civilisation. The overseers possessed tens of thousands of slaves, and they controlled a great area of territory, yet at the heart of their civilisation there was virtually no evidence at all of material wealth and certainly none of the metropolitan magnificence that Pollenport, thinking of the Earth's ancient slave economies, had expected to find. The overall impression was one of sterility, penury and barbarism, and he was amazed that such an elaborate political structure could have evolved without the accompaniment of a virile and comparable culture.

After the departure of the old woman there was a lull during which the slaves threw more fuel on the great bonfire, then went round extinguishing several of the torches until the cavern was in semi-darkness. "I suppose they'll be settling down for the night," said Sam. "What are we going to do? Stay here?"

"I think we shall have to, shan't we?" said Pollenport. "Unless Van Eyck comes back and rescues us."

"Oh, I don't know. At a pinch we could make our way back to the *Skylark*."

"How could we negotiate the river?"

"We could wade," said Sam. "It's not more than two or three feet deep at any place."

Pollenport considered the plan and rejected it. "Horrible as these Antigeosians are," he said, "we've got to gain their confidence, and to do that we've got to learn as much about them as possible. Sooner or later we shall need their help to get us back to the northern continent. Have you thought about that?"

"Yes, I have. And I don't like the conclusion I came to."

"Which is?"

"That we're condemned to spending the rest of our life here."

"Surely it's not as bad as that?" said Pollenport. "Surely we can design a boat capable of crossing the straits?"

"A boat that would survive those tidal waves?" murmured Sam sceptically. "I doubt it, but still I'd rather drown in the attempt than stay here. I suppose you plan to borrow a few slaves to help us build the boat?"

"Yes. Which is why we must keep in with the overseers. . . ."

Slaves, using slabs of slate as shovels, were raking out hot ashes from under the bonfire and carrying them to the centre of the ring. At the same time other slaves moved among the overseers handing them wooden vessels containing liquor, and Sam watched these preparations apprehensively.

"If I'm offered one of those noggins," he murmured, "I'm going to say No."

"It might be advisable," Pollenport agreed, smiling. "I imagine these characters go in for a fairly potent brew."

"And what's the idea of the cinder-bed?" Sam asked.

"Is somebody going to stage a fire-walking exhibition?"

A slave appeared carrying a large basket. He approached the glowing mass of cinders, took a handful of dried roots from the basket and threw them on to the ashes. For a moment they crackled and sputtered, and then gave off a dense grey smoke that rose in clouds towards the ceiling. Another slave entered the ring, holding a large heart-shaped fan, and with graceful movements he used the fan to spread the smoke so that it billowed outwards into the cavern. The overseers leant forward appreciatively, sniffing the smoke, and when wisps of it reached Pollenport he found that it had a pungent, aromatic smell that was not altogether unpleasant.

"It's probably an intoxicant," he told Sam. "If we find ourselves succumbing we'd better clear out. But I'd rather not—I don't want these fellows to know that we're susceptible to narcotics and poisons."

One of the red-clad slaves came towards them bearing pots of liquor and Pollenport was momentarily torn between conflicting emotions—a scientific curiosity regarding the brew and the desire to remain aloof and godlike. Commonsense won, prompted by an anxious nudge from Sam, and Pollenport waved the slave away.

"Did you see the stuff?" Sam demanded, in an awed voice. "It was as black and thick as treacle!"

Pollenport laughed and said: "If it's alcoholic, we may find ourselves up against some trouble later. I shouldn't think the overseers are at all improved by being in their cups."

He looked about him as he spoke, and was relieved to see that the overseers nearest them looked peaceable enough. They were reclining on their rugs, sipping the black liquor, inhaling the smoke and languidly chatting in gestures. The slaves continued to carry ashes from the bonfire to the ring, more and more dried roots were thrown on, and the smoke

was now so thick that Pollenport could no longer see more than ten to fifteen yards in front of him. His eyes and nostrils smarted a little, and he had the impression that all his senses were unusually acute and attentive.

"How's the smoke affecting you?" he asked Sam.

"No noticeable effect," said Sam. "I'm beginning to feel sleepy, but I think I should have done anyway."

"Then why don't you go to sleep? I feel extremely wakeful, so you might as well get two or three hours sleep while I keep guard."

"All right," said Sam, and promptly took off his jacket. He folded it carefully, lining outwards, placed it under his head on the bench and fell asleep almost at once.

Pollenport's sense of heightened perceptions lent an illusion of significance to everything about him. Shapes, shadows, outlines and, above all, movements became charged with portentous meaning and he felt as if he were poised on the brink of omniscience, as if the secrets of the whole universe were about to be revealed to him; and it needed a considerable effort of will to keep these sensations under control. He had to remind himself sternly that there was nothing unusual about illusions of potential omniscience. Cocaine-addicts had them, and he had experienced them himself in a fragmentary way by inhaling nitrous oxide and when drinking champagne, but never so strongly; and, although one part of his brain could dispose of them rationally, another part was completely bemused by the promise of the ultimate revelation.

The smoke billowed and eddied about him like a fog, yet it had not the consistency of a fog. Thin patches would momentarily appear through which he caught glimpses of comparatively far-off things, such as the polythitic idol leaning into the darkness at the back of the cavern, looking as if at any instant it would crush its gestikulatig acolyte between its colossal knees, and during one such glimpse

Pollenport actually saw the idol tremble and shudder; and the vibration was accompanied by a long-drawn-out rumble louder than any he had so far heard.

The floor of the cavern also shook faintly and Pollenport was relieved when none of the overseers took any notice of the tremor. It could be that they were too befuddled by drink and the pervading smoke to care, but he thought it was probable that they were indifferent to the earth shaking because they were used to it, and he noticed that the slaves, who presumably were at least as sober as he was, were utterly unalarmed. They moved through the smoke like scarlet wraiths, bringing in more and more bowls of liquor and continually adding ashes and roots to the fuming cinder-heap in the centre of the ring.

One by one the torches burnt out until at last there was nothing to relieve the smoky darkness except the glow of firelight. The slaves left the cavern and by then a good few of the overseers were asleep. The majority, however, stayed awake and Pollenport could just make out their forms as they crouched, watchful and expectant, with their legs drawn up and their arms around their knees.

The firelight dwindled and, as the smoke cleared, an ineluctable drowsiness crept over Pollenport. He struggled against it, and although for the most part he managed to keep awake, there were moments when his head nodded forward, with his consciousness hovering over an abyss of oblivion. Fragmentary dreams confused his thoughts and for some time he was unable to decide whether an impression of people moving in the semi-darkness, flocking into the cavern, was something that had happened in a dream or in reality.

He forced himself to sit upright, staring into the gloom, and listening. The fire, no longer blazing, had become a mound of charred logs and white ashes, glowing dimly and doing little to elucidate the patterns of the semi-darkness.

Yet Pollenport's idea that something was afoot grew stronger, and he became convinced that there were now many more people in the cavern than there had been earlier. Sounds of furtive movement came to his ears, silk rustled faintly and from close at hand he heard what he took to be the sound of someone sobbing.

Another noise, like the growl of a bear, startled him momentarily until he realised it was Sam starting to snore, and he was just wondering what to do when Sam moved again and woke himself up. He yawned and stretched, and then, as he swung his feet from the bench, groaned a little and muttered: "Christmas, I'm stiff. You awake, Jonah?"

"Yes."

"This damn bench has brought on my lumbago. How long have I been asleep?"

"About a couple of hours."

"Has Paul shown up?"

"No, I'm afraid not. I'm hoping he's found his way back to the *Skylark*."

"Which is what we ought to have done."

He yawned again, peering into the darkness.

"What goes on?" he asked. "Strikes me that about half those fellows are still awake."

"Yes," said Pollenport, and just then a log tumbled from the fire, releasing a ragged flame that flickered amidst the smoke and illuminated the cavern with pale red light. Shadows leapt through the darkness, and in that brief second Pollenport saw something which confirmed much that he had already suspected. He saw the firelight glint in a girl's green eyes and had time before the flame died to glimpse the horror in her face as she struggled to escape from under the body of one of the albinos. The man was crouched over her like a beast of prey over his victim, his stubby fingers were pressing into the flesh of her upper arms and her kimono had been torn from her, leaving her

nearly naked. It was obvious that she couldn't hold out for more than a few seconds.

"God," muttered Sam, as the firelight faded. "I'm going to settle that brute's hash!"

He was fumbling for his revolver and Pollenport had to restrain him. "Don't be crazy, Sam!" he whispered, urgently. "You can't hope to overthrow an entire social system by a single act of righteousness."

"No, but we can't just let it pass either. Good God, she wasn't even one of his kind."

"I know."

Sam subsided a little. "You mean, they interbreed?"

"Yes, they do, I've been suspecting it for some days and now I know it. You see, there aren't in fact three species of creatures here, but only two, and the slaves are the product of their interbreeding. The slaves are hybrids like mules or hinnies. And, like mules, they're all of one sex, and sterile."

Sam was silent for several seconds, digesting this, and then, as the full implications began to dawn on him, he whispered in an awed voice: "Good God. . . . Well, I'll be damned . . ."

Flabbergasted, he sat staring into the darkness and it was some time before he spoke again. . . .

(vi)

MIST hung in the defiles and gullies. It pressed against the *Skylark's* lucidex, and Paul woke up to a world of thin shadows and flat light, feeling lonelier than he had ever felt in his life. Neither Pollenport nor Sam had come back and, as he crawled from the bed and dashed water over his face and hands, his thoughts were haunted by the idea that he might never see them again.

He hadn't the heart to cook any breakfast. For more than

an hour he leant against the lucidex, wondering whether his best course would be to stay where he was or whether he ought to make his way into the habitation by wading along the tunnel; and, when he decided to wait for a while longer in the *Skylark*, he hoped it was commonsense rather than lack of courage that make up his mind for him.

"Anyway," he told himself, "I'll wait until the mist lifts a little."

For the time being it was so thick that he could see virtually nothing, and even the walls of rock surrounding him were only visible as dark shadows looming through the mist's whiteness. Once a sled, laden with the flayed carcasses of some small animal and dragged by slaves, rumbled past close by the *Skylark*, and Paul quickly moved back out of sight when he saw that the slaves were becoming restive, fighting among themselves and staring wistfully up at the spaceship. At the moment he did not want any trouble, nor did he want his presence in the *Skylark* to be known, and he was glad when the sled disappeared into the mist. A little later he heard a series of faint thudding sounds suggesting the carcasses were being shifted from the sled and loaded on to a raft. Presumably the habitation was taking in its meat supply.

Presently the mist lifted a little, became thin enough for Paul to be able to see the contours of the nearest hills and the outline of the volcano dimly silhouetted against a brownish sky; and signs of activity became more numerous. Two elderly dark-faced men in Van Eyck hats crossed the open space conversing gravely in gestures, and more clamped slaves appeared, a long chain of them, grouped in pairs with a tub of milk slung between each pair on poles. More sleds, laden with fish, vegetables and poultry, were dragged to the river-bank, where they were unloaded on to rafts, and Paul noticed that, although the rafts were manned solely by ageing slaves in scarlet rompers, the hard work of unloading

was all carried out by the clamped, half-starved slaves who hauled the sleds into position. He wondered how these social distinctions were arrived at, and if it were possible for a clamped slave to secure promotion, becoming perhaps first a foreman and then a livery slave.

Later on, rafts started coming from the other direction, emerging from the tunnel that led into the habitation, and Paul was surprised to see that these rafts all carried parties of young girls—not albinos, but girls of Van Eyck's race. Most were extremely young—some could hardly be more than fourteen or fifteen—and Paul counted no fewer than eighteen raft-loads of them, each raft carrying about twenty girls. All of them seemed strangely woebegone and despondent, huddling miserably together on the rafts and moving listlessly when they disembarked; and, as they straggled past the spaceship, Paul saw signs of strain and weariness in their faces, and noticed that several of the girls' kimonos were torn and bedraggled.

Several slaves, wearing a livery that Paul had not seen before—yellow rompers with black fur belts—now arrived on the scene, each leading one of the white animals. More rafts appeared, and this time they bore masked and robed overseers. As each of the overseers leapt ashore he gestured peremptorily and a slave brought him his steed. The slaves helped the overseers mount, whips flashed and the animals galloped furiously away, heading for the broad defile along which the *Skylark* had been dragged the day before.

After that nothing much happened for some time, and Paul started to get his breakfast, opening a can of beans and making tea. Every few minutes he glanced through the lucidex towards the river, hoping desperately that before long Pollenport and Sam would appear, and as soon as he had finished his breakfast he climbed up to the little gantry by the storage compartments.

The gantry commanded a better view than the control

chamber and, from it, now that the mist had more or less lifted, Paul could overlook every foot of the open space in which the *Skylark* was stranded. There was no one about except one senile slave, as emaciated as a scarecrow, slinking along in the shadow of the cliffs, and for the most part Paul kept his gaze on the river's dark waters and prayed for a raft to appear bringing Pollenport and Sam. But the only raft he saw was a small one travelling in the opposite direction and unoccupied except by the two slaves propelling it.

Soon after the small raft had disappeared into the tunnel, he noticed a slight movement among the shadows in the tunnel's mouth, and then saw a whitish object that presently resolved itself into the upper part of a man's body. Someone was wading along the river towards the *Skylark*, and Paul's heart gave an excited leap as he told himself it could only be either Pollenport or Sam.

The man emerged from the shadows, but he was carrying a small dark bundle on his head, and his face was hidden by the arm that held it in place. He moved forward cautiously, testing the river bed with his foot before each step, and it was this extreme caution that made Paul decide it was Sam—Pollenport would have plunged along, splashing and stumbling like a cart-horse in a pond.

Yes, it was Sam all right, Paul told himself, and never in his life had he felt so pleased to see anyone. He heaved a great sigh of relief and, grinning, asked himself why on earth Sam was wearing what appeared to be a white bathing costume, streaked with mud. He leant against the lucidex and waved, but Sam was too busy scrambling up the river bank to look in his direction.

Two Antigean girls in bright kimonos happened to arrive on the scene just then, and when they saw Sam they stopped dead for a moment in astonishment, then ran towards him, laughing and squeaking with excitement. He waved to them agitatedly to go away, started to retreat into the river,

and it was then that Paul realised that what he had taken to be a white bathing costume was in fact a suit of terrestrial underwear—ankle-length pants and a long-sleeved vest of a kind that Paul had believed to be extinct until he met Sam. No doubt the bundle on Sam's head was his precious business suit, and Paul noticed that he carried a pair of shoes in his other hand.

The girls had reached the river bank and were offering Sam their hands, but Sam, red in the face, retreated farther and farther into the river until the water was decently above his waist. He waved his shoes at the girls, imploring them to leave him, and Paul decided he had better go to the rescue. He climbed down from the gantry and on his way through the bunkroom grabbed a blanket from one of the bunks.

The senile slave and a small boy with a Van Eyck hat slung across his shoulders had joined the two girls by the time Paul reached the river, and the look of relief on Sam's face when he saw Paul was something to be remembered forever. Paul scrambled down the bank to the water's edge, took Sam's bundle from him and handed him the blanket.

"What's happened to Jonah?" he asked anxiously, as they clambered up the bank.

"He's all right," Sam assured him. "I'm the one you should ask after. It must've taken me the best part of an hour to get here."

"And the poor guy's feet are bleeding," murmured Paul, sympathetically.

The Antigeosians drew back as the two men reached the top of the bank and Sam glanced down at his mud-caked feet. "You're damn right, they're bleeding," he muttered. "In fact, I daresay I've lost a few toes in transit. There are flints in that mud like razor-blades." They started out towards the *Skylark*, and he added, resentfully: "What's more, I was nearly run down by a raft."

"What did you do? Duck?"

"Heaven forbid. Why, there are reptiles in that water three feet long. No, I squeezed myself against the wall and the slaves didn't see me. Damned if I'm looking forward to the return journey."

"Well, there are other ways into the habitation," said Paul. "I know of one, but whether we can use it is another matter."

They had arrived at the *Skylark*. Sam fastened the blanket securely round his waist and started up the rope ladder. Three more girls joined the other Antigeosians; they were talking to each other in gestures, and Paul could see from their glances that they were worrying about his lack of antennæ. In fact, they seemed considerably sorry for him, and he grinned at them in an attempt to show them that he did not need their pity. . . .

Once he was back in the *Skylark* he heated some water and helped Sam wash off the mud. He also dressed Sam's feet for him and made another cup of tea; and while he was doing this Sam told him of the night's events. He was understandably shocked by much of what Sam had to say, and when he learnt of the slaves' origins, he murmured: "Ah, that explains it."

"It explains lots of things," said Sam, "but what do you mean in particular?"

Paul poured out two more cups of tea and then told Sam of his adventures. He told him about the slave and the little boy in the cave, and about the woman. "I took her gestures to mean that she was the mother of both the little boy and the slave," he said, "and yet I couldn't believe it. Gee, it's a hell of a set-up, isn't it, Sam?"

"Horrible."

"It's pretty obvious that it's against the law for that small boy to be alive. He hasn't got a big hat. I guess there are only so many big hats, and that's how many men of Van Eyck's race there are allowed to be."

"That's how it is, I suppose," said Sam. "The overseers must be scared stiff of the Van Eycks, yet they can't exterminate them entirely or they'd cut their own throats. There'd be no more brown-skinned women, and consequently no slaves. Then the overseers would have to work, and that'd be terrible."

"That woman's got guts," said Paul. "Hell, I wonder that the strain of it doesn't break her up. Day after day and year after year, and all the time she's operating right at the heart of the overseers' headquarters. She works in the kitchens there."

"I don't expect hers is an isolated case," said Sam. "Or, if it is, Antigean mothers must be considerably different from terrestrial ones. I'm looking forward to learning more about this society—and how much we learn rather depends upon what success Jonah has in teaching Van Eyck English."

"He's going to try, is he?"

"Definitely. And I don't see why he shouldn't be successful. After all, we taught dozens of the North Antigeanosians, and the Van Eycks seem to be very much like them. Anyway, they've got vocal chords, and aren't fools."

"Have you seen Van Eyck this morning?"

Sam nodded. Neither he nor Pollenport had slept much during the night, and the morning had been heralded by slaves entering the cavern bearing lighted torches and fuel for the fire. The girls had gone by then, and the albinos lay about the cavern's floor sound asleep, obscenely naked and looking like enormous white slugs. The slaves had roused them by washing their faces and chests with cold water, and then bowls of a nauseous-looking soup had been brought in, forming the overseers' breakfast. Sam had noticed that the idol's attendant was still in the same position, still gesticulating, and it seemed fairly certain that he had been there all night. And presently Van Eyck had returned.

"He had fruit for his breakfast," said Sam. "In fact, I

think he's a vegetarian. Jonah started right away to try and teach him some English, but Van Eyck didn't react as spontaneously as the North Antigeosians did. Jonah pointed to things and named them, but Van Eyck made no attempt to imitate him. He just sat and listened, looking intelligent, and I've an idea he was taking most of it in."

"Is Jonah going to join us here?" Paul asked.

Sam shook his head. "No, his plan is to stay in the habitation for several days. He wants the overseers to get used to him. He feels that if he comes and lives in the *Skylark*, the slaves may start to riot. We'd be blamed for it, and would stand a good chance of getting bumped off. Whereas the only slaves allowed in the habitation are those fellows in livery, and they seem thoroughly corrupt and docile. When I've had some sleep I'm going to pack some food into a kit-bag, and one of us will have to get it to Jonah somehow. Personally, I don't feel at all keen on wading back through that tunnel."

"I'll go," said Paul, "and later on maybe we'll get a raft service laid on for us. But what are Jonah's ultimate plans? He gains the overseers' confidence, and then what?"

"Persuades them to lend us enough slaves and material to build a ship. And when it's built we sail back to the northern continent."

"Oh?" said Paul, sceptically. "And who's going to design a ship capable of surviving the tidal waves?"

"We are," said Sam. "Yes, I think we can design one, but what worries me is whether the slaves can build it. They're hardly expert carpenters, to say the least of it."

"They're certainly not," said Paul. "Hell, they never make anything except sleds and rafts. Jonah must be crazy if he thinks they can build a ship."

"Yes," said Sam. "But the fact remains that we've got to get back somehow. I'm not looking forward to living out my life among this mob."

Paul was silent for some minutes, while Sam settled himself on one of the mattresses and pulled the blankets over him. He was nearly asleep when Paul said suddenly: "What about McQuoid?"

"What? Oh, McQuoid. He's probably dead by now."

"We'll have to make some attempt to find him," said Paul. "After all, we've got some idea of where he is, and we can hardly go back to the northern continent without having at least a shot at rescuing him."

"Oh, to hell with him," muttered Sam. "So far we don't even know how to rescue ourselves, let alone him. Anyway, I'm tired. . . ."

Paul took a kitbag and went up to the storage compartment. He looked down through the lucidex before starting to pack the bag with canned food for Pollenport, and he wasn't surprised to see that the crowd of Antigeosians now numbered about fifty, mostly women and children, and it struck him that this crowd was much more subdued than the one that had greeted the *Skylark* the day before. He gazed down at the intent, unsmiling faces and decided that the Antigeosians were puzzled and perhaps a little disturbed by Pollenport's absence. It was strange how all the natives seemed to realise that Pollenport was the leader of the party, and Paul wondered what it was that made them so certain in their choice. . . .

(vii)

VAN EYCK visited the *Skylark* that afternoon. He thrust his way through the little crowd that was rapidly becoming a permanency, and shook the rope ladder until it rattled against the hull.

The noise attracted Paul's attention. He came to the exit hatch and poked his head out. He greeted Van Eyck with a

wave of his hand and then was startled to hear the Anti-geosian speak to him in something that might have been English.

"Laughed," said Van Eyck.

Paul stared at him in astonishment. "What?" he muttered.

"Laughed," said Van Eyck again, and pointed vaguely towards the habitation.

"Who laughed?" Paul asked, but Van Eyck said nothing more, and his expression was inscrutable.

Paul withdrew and went back to the control compartment. Sam had just woken up, and Paul told him that Van Eyck was outside trying to speak English. "He keeps saying 'Laughed'," he said.

Sam struggled into a sitting position and grinned. "You sure he's not trying to say 'raft'?" he asked. "I'd say that was more like it."

"Why, of course!" said Paul, smiling. "You mean he's got a raft to take us to Jonah?"

"That's it, I expect. And old Jonah's certainly been making headway with the language lesson, hasn't he?"

Paul took hold of the kitbag he had packed for Pollenport and dragged it to the exit shaft. "Shall I go alone?" he asked. "I mean, you look as if you could do with some more sleep."

"All right," said Sam, and Paul started down the exit shaft, pulling the kitbag in after him. . . .

The pattern of their lives for the next few weeks was beginning to form. This expedition into the habitation to visit Pollenport and take him supplies was to become a daily event. Several times Sam suggested to Pollenport that he would be more comfortable living in the *Skylark*, but Pollenport stuck to his plan and continued to live in the habitation, breathing the sulphurous air and studying the moves of the overseers. He spent most of his time taking notes and teaching Van Eyck English, and presently the

Antigeosians, reluctant to let anything distract them from their brutish amusements, were accepting him as if he'd always been there. He became as much a part of the metropolis as the stone idol and as constant in his attendance there as the series of priests gesticulating day and night between the idol's knees.

Paul and Sam found life on the southern continent far from exhilarating. An atmosphere of foreboding hung over the cliff-city unremittingly, and every day seemed to promise a thunderstorm that never came. The brooding cliffs, the mists veiling an ochreous sky, the smouldering volcano, and the silence—those were the things that chiefly contributed to that permeating, oppressive atmosphere, and it wasn't long before Paul almost found himself hoping for a cataclysm, hoping either that the volcano would erupt or that the frequent earth tremors would develop into a full-blown earthquake; or, at least, hoping for anything that would effectively break the spell.

Most of the time he and Sam simply felt bored and frustrated. They explored the immediate vicinity and found that for miles to the north and east of the cliff-city there was nothing except desert, while to the south of it were the sombre hills and to the west a broad tract of well-watered land that eventually degenerated into marshes and swamps.

They would have carried their explorations further but for the obvious disapproval of the ruling caste. The overseers appeared to distrust the motives underlying these expeditions and no doubt they felt their suspicions justified by the behaviour of the field slaves, who became excited and obstreperous whenever they saw the space-travellers. On one occasion an overseer lost his head completely and slashed Sam with his whip, thereby nearly provoking the very thing he sought to prevent—a revolt of the slaves—and Sam only avoided further punishment by drawing his revolver and firing into the air. Later, he told Pollenport

of the incident and from then on, acting on Pollenport's advice, they confined themselves to the cliff-city, spending most of their time in the *Skylark* itself.

So they became prisoners and, as with most prisoners, their thoughts and conversation dwelt principally on the chances of escape. They became marine engineers and designed various vessels theoretically capable of surviving the tidal waves that roared across the Antigean oceans five times every day, but each vessel, even the simplest, suffered from the same disadvantage—to build it would be impossible without the help of numerous highly-skilled carpenters.

"And as far as the slaves are concerned," said Sam, "we might as well expect them to build us an aeroplane."

"I guess you're right."

"Grim prospect, isn't it? We can't sail back. We can't fly back. We can't swim back, and we can't tunnel our way back. You know what that adds up to, don't you?"

"Sure. To spending the rest of our lives here."

"I'm afraid so," said Sam. "Not only do we have to get ourselves marooned on a foreign planet, but we go and pick the nastiest part of it."

"Maybe later on we'll find that this continent has some pleasant parts."

"I doubt it," said Sam, gloomily. "The overseers are an aggressive lot, and I reckon we can trust them to have grabbed the best that was going. If you ask me, this continent is all mountains, deserts and swamps, and I don't suppose the entire population numbers more than a few million."

The days dragged interminably and, of the three space-travellers, only Pollenport refused to give way to despondency. He no longer believed that a ship could be built, but simply assured his colleagues, whenever they visited him, that something would turn up; and presently, when they

had been in the cliff city for just on six weeks, his optimism was rewarded. Something did turn up.

At first Sam and Paul failed to appreciate the significance of that straggling procession of twenty or thirty clamped slaves that came crawling towards the *Skylark* early one morning. Mist hung among the cliffs, and for some minutes the space-travellers couldn't make out the exact nature of the object the slaves carried between them. Sam's immediate idea was that it was the corpse of some long grey-skinned reptile.

"A snake," he suggested.

"Some snake," Paul muttered. "It's about eighty feet long."

The procession was attended by a mounted overseer. He rode ahead of the slaves towards the spaceship, shouted: "Yuh!" and pointed with his whip to the silver-grey object as if he expected the space-travellers to be either impressed or pleased; and then, as the slaves approached and dropped their burden, Sam recognised it for what it was.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "It's our parachute!"

Disappointed, Paul turned away. "I guess they needn't have bothered," he murmured. "If there's anything we can struggle along without, I'd say it was a parachute."

"Wonder where they found it," said Sam. "I suppose it was torn from the *Skylark* when we came avalanching down that mountain. Anything could have happened to it after that, and I suppose for the slaves it's got almost a religious significance. Looks to me as if the overseers didn't dare not to let them bring it to us."

The slaves gazed up at the spaceship for several seconds, and then returned their attention to the parachute. They handled it reverently, carefully unravelling its cords and then spreading the nylon out to its fullest extent, revealing a great billowing canopy nearly three hundred feet in diameter.

"It's hardly torn at all," said Sam. "Well, if we can't do anything else with it, at least it will keep us in shirts for the rest of our lives——" He broke off abruptly as an idea came to him and turned to Paul with widening eyes. "My God, Paul, we're a couple of fools!" he said. "That parachute's the answer to our prayer."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, a balloon!" said Sam. "Why shouldn't we go back to the other continent by balloon?"

Paul gazed at him doubtfully. "It'd be one helluvan undertaking," he muttered.

"Of course. But so was our expedition to Antigoes one helluvan undertaking. Yet we achieved it."

"Sure. But a balloon. How do we make a balloon?"

"Well, first we'll have to cut the parachute into spindle-shaped sections. Then we'll sew them together to form a sphere. God knows what we'll use for varnish, but if we melt down every scrap of rubber we can find in the *Skylark* we ought to be able to manage something. We can make the net out of the parachute's cords and the gondola out of canvas and wood."

"What about the gas?"

"Hydrogen, naturally," said Sam. "And we can make that easily enough now we've got the generator working again."

Paul suddenly grinned. "Well, it'll be something to do," he said. "But I guess it'll be touch and go whether we get through with the job before we reach the retiring age. . . ."

VAN EYCK was something of a pedant and Pollenport found the task of teaching him English a prolonged and exasperating one. The idea of a spoken language fascinated the Antigeosian, but it was its formal aspects that seemed to interest him rather than its possibilities as a means of communication, and he appeared to be much more intent upon mastering the intricacies of grammar than he was upon acquiring a practical vocabulary.

The North Antigeosians had been different. In their eagerness to discover all they could about the space-travellers they had never bothered to learn more than the rudiments of English grammar, but had collected words with the avidity of philatelists collecting stamps, and Pollenport had been able to have better, more comprehensible conversations with them at the end of a week than he could have with Van Eyck at the end of a month.

It was a strain, that struggle with participles, gerunds and conditionals, in the smoky darkness of the cavern, but Pollenport persevered and eventually Van Eyck emerged from the experience speaking an English that was at least accurate as far as grammar was concerned, if somewhat stilted and artificial as a means of expression—the sort of English an intelligent robot might produce if one could ever be taught to speak.

“Professor Pollenport,” he said one day after the formal lessons had come to an end, “there have no doubt been occasions during the course of tuition when you have wondered why it was that I was taking such pains to learn your language. That is to say, you must have been puzzled as to why I should wish to learn English beyond whatever degree of mastery would be sufficient to establish a method of communication between us. To make myself clear I should like to suggest that there were times when you said to

yourself, 'Why does this Antigeosian trouble himself with learning English in such detail, when the language can be of small use to him except in talking to me and my two friends?' Now, Professor Pollenport, am I right in believing that such thoughts have entered your mind?"

"Well, more or less," said Pollenport. "At least I'll admit that I sometimes thought you were making unnecessarily heavy weather of it all. In particular, your preoccupation with the tenses of verbs created a jungle that I thought we should never escape from. You see, the people on the other continent never got much beyond the first person singular of the present indicative, and yet they usually managed to say what they wanted to say."

"Of course," said Van Eyck, nodding. "But no doubt their object in learning English was a considerably more limited one than mine. And now you must understand, Professor Pollenport, that I intend that your language shall be spoken in this land long after you and I have disintegrated into our component elements. Consequently I applied myself to the learning of your tongue with all the concentration I am capable of, since it was essential that the original recipient of the language should acquire all the grammar, syntax, idiom and vocabulary that he could possibly encompass."

"But why?" asked Pollenport. "I mean, why do you want English to become an Antigeon language? You appear to have a perfectly efficient language of your own."

Van Eyck did not reply at once. He seemed a little nervous, and glanced uneasily about the cavern before answering.

It was daytime and there were not more than a dozen overseers in the place—senior ones and mostly decrepit. The others were out, either hunting or guarding the slaves, and the cavern was almost in darkness. No torches burned, and what light there was was provided by the half-hearted

flames of the bonfire, which had not been stoked up since early that morning. Deep shadows hid the idol, but its attendant was just visible, standing between the figure's knees and tirelessly gesticulating.

In fact, it was towards this acolyte that Van Eyck presently gestured, and then pointed to himself.

"The Behatted Ones," he said with a sardonic grimace. "There are just two hundred and ninety-two of us—that is to say, there are exactly as many of us as there are days in the Antigean year—and there are five thousand of *them*!" and he waved contemptuously towards the obese and naked overseers huddling round the fire.

He moved a little nearer to Pollenport, and for a moment his usually inscrutable face was transfigured by passion. "Professor Pollenport," he said, "you must believe me when I tell you that if we—the Behatted Ones, that is to say—had a means of communication that was not intelligible to the overseers we should be a great step nearer our emancipation. And that is why I am so interested in your language."

"I see. But wouldn't it be simpler to evolve a code, or something of the sort, on the basis of the gesture language?"

"A code?" asked Van Eyck, not understanding the word.

Pollenport explained, and the Antigean smiled, then shook his head.

"It appears," he said, "that your conception of the gesture language is an erroneous one. No doubt you consider it far more analogous to your terrestrial systems of language than is actually the fact, and I shall endeavour to rectify your misapprehension. In your language the relationship between a word and the object it denotes is entirely arbitrary. Indeed, you yourself have explained to me that the word you use to describe any given article depends absolutely upon which part of your world you happen to come from. A man from England will use one word, and a man from Trance——"

"France," suggested Pollenport.

"—and a man from France will use another to describe the same thing. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes."

"But in our gesture language no such differences are possible, because the relationship between a word and the object it denotes is not arbitrary but actual. It can vary even less than one man's drawn picture of, for instance, a given face can vary from another man's, and when we Antigiosians converse we are, in effect, drawing pictures in each other's minds. Consequently, if I were ever confronted by one of the North Antigiosians—who, you tell me, also have antennæ and a gesture language—I have little doubt that I should be able to converse with him as easily as I am now conversing with you. There might be differences of style and emphasís, but general meanings would be inescapable—unless the conversation happened to be couched mainly in abstract terms, which do admittedly allow of a certain latitude in the selection of symbols."

The conception was not an easy one to grasp, and Pollenport was silent for some minutes, pondering it, and presently he came to the conclusion that communication in the gesture language must be almost like opening a part of one's mind to the view of the world. Conversation between two Antigiosians was a more direct process than conversation between two earth people. There would be less room for misunderstanding and, incidentally, fewer opportunities for dissembling. It was not the language of conspiracy and it clearly would not lend itself to the formation of codes.

"But you have a written language, haven't you?" he asked.

For a moment Van Eyck looked faintly startled. He glanced uneasily towards the overseers and Pollenport half-expected him to deny the existence of a written language.

However, Van Eyck had no talent for lying and at length he simply asked: "How do you know?"

"We guessed," Pollenport told him. "The designs on your pottery and in your embroideries bear some resemblance to certain terrestrial systems of writing—that's all."

"I understand," said Van Eyck. "Yes, we have a written language, and it is almost the only thing we have managed to keep secret from the albinos throughout the centuries of our enslavement. Even so, it's been of singularly little use to us."

He went on to explain that even under the most favourable circumstances the written language would have been cumbersome and unwieldy, consisting as it did of some twenty-four thousand separate ideograms that had to be memorised before anything approaching complete mastery could be attained.

"For myself," he said, "I know perhaps six or seven thousand characters, and that is far from being enough to compose any except the simplest inscriptions. I was taught by my mother and it is upon the women of our race that the task of preserving the language principally devolves. You see, the overseers fear us men, the Behatted Ones, and keep us apart from each other. We are forbidden to converse, and the only communication we have with each other is through the medium of our women or by means of messages scratched on fragments of rock—messages that are imperfectly expressed and imperfectly understood." He glanced at Pollenport with a faintly triumphant smile and finished: "Now perhaps you can understand how much it will mean to us to acquire a spoken language—a language that can be whispered and, as you have assured me, a language that can be written simply in characters that bear a phonetic relationship to the words themselves. Tomorrow I hope you will start teaching me how to write."

"Certainly," said Pollenport. "I've promised I would, but we've got to be careful not to arouse the suspicions of the overseers. When they see us making marks on paper won't they wonder what we're up to?"

"I do not think so," said Van Eyck. "By nature they are dull-witted and incurious, and they lack sufficient imagination to be able to encompass the conception of writing. That is how we've been successful in keeping the secret of our written language for so long."

Just then one of the overseers sat up and thumped his chest with his fist. This was the usual method of summoning slaves, and a moment later it transpired that the overseer wanted more logs thrown on to the fire. Pollenport drew Van Eyck's attention to him, and said: "Can you read the inscription on his belt?"

"Oh yes. Those belt inscriptions are all couched in more or less simple terms. Our women put them on and it amuses them to make them critical of the wearer. That one reads: 'This overlord is a despoiler of little girls'. The belt of the man next him reads: 'This is One-Ear—a torturer of slaves', and the belt of the man lying down is inscribed: 'Pretty women, beware—this gentleman kills those whom he touches'."

Van Eyck told Pollenport that the same principle persisted wherever the written word was found. The drinking vessels used by the albinos were invariably inscribed with sentiments unfavourable to the users. "May all I hold turn to poison," was a frequent motto, and the harness of the white animals was often embroidered with the words: "Good steed, please throw your rider and break his neck".

"And that long inscription on the wall?" asked Pollenport, pointing. "Is that also a diatribe against the overseers?"

"No," said Van Eyck. "That is an extremely ancient inscription, perhaps five or six thousand years old, and it

dates from the time when my people were in sole possession of this system of underground caverns. As far as it can be deciphered and interpreted, it relates the history of our people up to the time it was written and it tells of the coming of our remote ancestors to this land."

"Where did they come from?" asked Pollenport.

"From somewhere across the sea," Van Eyck told him. "They came on rafts and to this day our name for ourselves means 'the people of the islands'."

Pollenport found this information exciting. "Amazing!" he exclaimed. "That's also exactly what the North Antigeosians call themselves. As you know, I've always suspected that you and they spring from a common stock."

However, that was all the evidence he could muster in support of his theory. He questioned Van Eyck closely, but he could get no hint of any traditions comparable to those of the North Antigeosians, and there was nothing to suggest that Van Eyck's ancestors had been forced to leave the islands by some cataclysm such as a submarine upheaval.

"We only know that they came," said Van Eyck. "And that they came on rafts," and Pollenport reflected that possibly those ancient Antigeosians had left the islands some centuries earlier than the others. Perhaps, also, they had inhabited a different part of the archipelago and so had not shared the same traditions.

"When our ancestors arrived on this continent," said Van Eyck, "all this part was in the sole possession of the albinos, living, as you can imagine, in conditions of extreme barbarism and brutality. Our people numbered only a few hundred on arrival, they were not given to war or fighting, and it was only by dint of their superior intelligence and by the exercise of great cunning that they were able to survive at all. They had the good fortune, quite early after they came, to discover this underground labyrinth of caves, and so were able to provide themselves with a permanent

retreat where the albinos, lacking the intelligence to build and use rafts, could not molest them."

In those days, it seemed, the albinos had lived mainly by hunting and by preying on the numerous aboriginal tribes which had inhabited the mountains and the marshes. They had had no agriculture, but they had understood something about the herding and breeding of animals, and they had already succeeded in domesticating the large white mountain goats, which they used as beasts of burden. They dressed entirely in furs, and had not the use of metal, but their women were highly skilled in making weapons from flint, obsidian, bone and ivory. What social organisation they had was ramshackle and primitive, they were continually warring among themselves and, in hard times, were not above a certain amount of cannibalism.

In that remote era, the relationship between the two races exhibited various phases. The initial raids and skirmishes were followed by a period during which the albinos left the newcomers severely alone, regarding them, apparently, with something approaching awe, believing that the little brown men had assumed control of the volcano and could cause it to erupt whenever they chose. That period lasted centuries, and Van Eyck's ancestors made good use of it to establish themselves. They planted their crops in the valleys, and on the slopes of volcanoes, prospected for metal among the mountains, built rafts and explored the coast, and, in all ways, picked up the threads of their former civilisation.

At a later period a considerable commerce grew up between the two races, and for a time they appear to have existed side by side almost in a state of symbiosis. The albinos supplied the brown men with various animal products such as hides, wool, meat, eggs and milk, and in return Van Eyck's ancestors augmented the albinos' economy with a great variety of manufactured goods—cloth, leather, pottery, bronze and small amounts of iron and silver.

This phase came to a stormy end when the albinos developed an unhealthy and consuming predilection for the brown-skinned women. Why they should suddenly be seized by this mania for the women of another species was inexplicable, and Antigean history had no solution to offer, but contented itself with a bald statement of the facts—the phenomenon began with a few isolated instances of abduction which were soon followed by organised raping parties. The obsession spread through the land like a plague and presently the first hybrids were born.

“The Age of Calamity,” said Van Eyck, “that is how our history terms that period. We tried to cut ourselves off altogether from the albinos, but our society had become so integrated with theirs that the result was disaster. Our food stocks failed. The albinos kept us from the valleys and destroyed our fishing-rafts. The volcano had not erupted for more than two centuries and the albinos no longer retained any fear of us. For over a year we lived in these caves in a state of siege, but in the end we were forced by starvation to ask the albinos for terms.”

He shuddered as he said that and fell silent, so that after a minute or two Pollenport had to recall him to the present with the remark: “Their terms were pitiless, I take it?”

Van Eyck came to himself with a start, and nodded. “Yes—pitiless. The albinos demanded five hundred of our women at their selection, and they ordained that we were to leave this habitation for ever.”

“And your people submitted?”

“Yes,” said Van Eyck, and his eyes darkened. “They submitted. . . .”

POLLENPORT was unable to get Van Eyck to say anything more on that occasion, but the lapse of a few days found the Antigeosian willing to return to the subject, and he told Pollenport a good deal more about the history of his ancestors.

Records of the period following the eviction from the habitation were scanty, but both tradition and probability suggested that the brown-skinned race had had to face long years of hardship and privation. Yet throughout that period, which lasted perhaps for centuries—scattered though the peoples were among the valleys and along the seaboard, living miserably in caves and hovels—they never lost their sense of national unity, never relinquished their traditions or their culture. They became hardened and embittered, but through everything they were sustained by a conviction that one day they would turn the tables on the albinos.

“My ancestors grew corn and vegetables in the valleys,” said Van Eyck. “They built rafts and fished in the rivers and in the sea. To some extent, they even prospered, although the albinos harassed them continually—that is to say, they organised raids upon them, seizing the food stocks and ravishing the girls. Hybrids became numerous, but, in spite of their shameful origins, my ancestors accepted them into their society as equals.”

A gradual change came over the brown-skinned men during that period, and from the depths of their bitterness something resembling a martial spirit was born. A time came when they no longer invariably sought their defence in retreat and flight. They began to fight back. They began to forge weapons—swords, maces and spears. In a minor way, they began to think in terms of tactics and manœuvres, and there were some visionaries among them who even dreamt of carrying the war into the enemy’s camp. They dreamt of

forming a dedicated, disciplined army that would overthrow the tyrants and reconquer the lost habitation.

At that point a strange and elusive figure enters the story. The Antigean name for him, in the gesture language, was "Thumbs", and he was proverbial in Antigean folklore as a maker of unintentional mischief. That he had once had actual existence was beyond dispute, but so much legend had accumulated round his name during the course of centuries that it was no longer possible to draw any definitive line between fact and fable.

"We are told," said Van Eyck, "that he loved a beautiful young girl called Silvergreen. According to the legend, there has never been a more beautiful girl either before or since, and the lovely woods which grow on the southern slopes of these hills are still called Silvergreen's Woods, because it was there that she and Thumbs used to meet in the summer afternoons of their courtship. But there came a day when Thumbs, on his way to meet Silvergreen, heard her screaming for him and her screams rang through the woods just as they do to this day when the wind is in a certain quarter. Thumbs hurried to her, but he reached her too late—an albino warrior had already had his way with her and was riding off. Thumbs pursued him, but he would have stood no chance of catching his quarry, except that the albino's mount stumbled and fell.

"Thumbs threw himself on to his enemy and, in the struggle that ensued the albino's vizor was torn from his face, revealing that he was one-eyed and noseless, with a monstrous purple birth-mark disfiguring one cheek. He succeeded in escaping from Thumbs, but not before Thumbs had torn off one of his ears.

"But poor Silvergreen died from shame. She lingered for three days and three nights and then died. . . ."

At that point in the legend the character of Thumbs underwent a metamorphosis. From being the typical fairy-

story lover, *sans peur et sans reproche*, he became a sort of Tyl Eulenspiegel, puckishly bent upon disconcerting the dignity of the albinos and wreaking his vengeance upon Purple-face in particular.

"A great number of tales are told of his exploits and achievements," said Van Eyck, "but the only one which concerns us—and which seems most likely to have an historical basis—deals with his adventures among the albinos' women.

"As I believe you know, the albinos are monogamous as far as their own women are concerned, and they keep their wives in the strictest seclusion, visiting them only at certain times of the year, and then solely in the interests of the propagation of their race. And when an albino dies, it is his widow's duty and privilege to climb up to the top of the volcano and throw herself into the crater.

"However, to return to the matter in hand, I must tell you that Thumbs became obsessed by the idea that his revenge upon Purple-face would not be complete until he had dealt with the albino's wife in the same way that Purple-face had dealt with Silvergreen, and to that end he smuggled himself into the women's habitation in a barrel of pickles. The full story of his adventures in the zenana, as it has been handed down to us, is told with a great wealth of detail, most of it bawdy, but for the moment I think it is sufficient for me to say that Thumbs was successful in his main intention—and in due course a hybrid was born to Purple-face's wife."

This much anyway was an indisputable historical fact—that, somewhere between two and three thousand years before, a dark-skinned, green-eyed child was born to one of the albino women. It was the only instance in Antigean history of a hybrid having a brown-skinned man for its father, and an albino for its mother, and the albinos' self-respect demanded that they deal with the matter by

pretending that it hadn't happened. Even to kill the hybrid would have been an admission that they had been fooled, and so he was permitted to live on the tacit understanding that, in spite of appearances, his skin was white and his eyes pink. In any case the chances were that he would be killed during his adolescence in one of the series of eliminating knife-fights by means of which the young albinos—those that survived—earned their places in the oligarchy.

However, he wasn't killed. He attained manhood and since he combined the intelligence of the brown-skinned people with the animal courage of the albinos, he soon proved himself a force to be reckoned with.

"Our name for him is 'the Scourge'," said Van Eyck, "and by the time he was twenty-five he had achieved a position of paramount leadership such as no albino had ever achieved. He became, in effect, a dictator and slew all those who opposed him, made disciples of the rest and then set about establishing the law."

"The law?" queried Pollenport, doubting if the Anti-geosian properly understood the word.

"Yes. His law," said Van Eyck, bitterly. "And it's the law we still live by. First, through the medium of a series of brilliantly-executed military expeditions, he dealt with the aboriginal tribes. He purged the land of them and pushed them back beyond the mountains, beyond the marshes and beyond the hills. And then it was our turn.

"He knew quite well what we were planning, and he knew that, if ever we succeeded in building an army, the time would come when we should overthrow the albinos. And he knew many other things besides. Yes, he had a deep intuitive understanding of the possibilities and limitations of this land. He knew it was too impoverished to support any large population in comfort and he could see that, in spite of our defeat and humiliation, what wealth there was was slowly getting into our hands. And as we brought

more and more land under cultivation the albinos' hunting-grounds shrank. We were dooming them to extinction unless their way of life underwent a revolutionary change . . ."

Van Eyck went on to tell of the Year of the Massacre, the year when the Scourge rallied all his forces and fell upon the brown-skinned people with a ruthlessness unparalleled in our terrestrial history. The albino army raged through the valleys like a primeval fire, killing the brown-skinned men, carrying off the women and children and leaving the hybrids to till the fields under the supervision of albino overseers. The Antigean social system was beginning to take shape.

"Fewer than five hundred of our men were permitted to survive," said Van Eyck, "and they were brought to this part of the world along with the women. The Scourge had his plans for them, as he had his plans for everything else . . ."

The Scourge had been a man of forty at the time of the Massacre, and he spent the last fifty years of life perfecting the law. He first laid it down that the albinos were the ruling race, and that everything in the land, dead or living, belonged to them. Their numbers were to be limited to five thousand in order that the wealth should never be too thinly spread among them and, to guarantee this number, the Scourge regularised the system of elimination-contests.

Until that time the albino youths had fought each other more or less indiscriminately, and a youth was deemed to have reached manhood when no one else of his generation cared to challenge him. The Scourge regularised the system by making the steel whip the symbol of manhood and by ordaining that there should never be more than five thousand of the whips in existence at any one time. He then decreed that, on the death of an overlord, his steel whip should be impounded and presently awarded to the survivor of a series

of elimination bouts fought with knives by the adolescent youths; and so he ensured that the lawful number of adult albinos was maintained, that the bravest and strongest of each generation was selected to fill the ranks and that the other overseers were provided with more or less continuous entertainment.

He laid it down that the overseers' principal duties were to supervise the slaves and guard the produce of land and sea, and to that end he divided the realm into rather more than a thousand districts or provinces and appointed an albino as governor over each.

"A plan that has continued without modification to this day," said Van Eyck. "The provincial overseers live in underground habitations in a fair state of luxury, attended by slaves as personal servants and groom~~s~~, and they retain large harems of brown-skinned girls. At the age of forty they retire and then are free to come and live here, in the metropolis, and spend the rest of their days in idleness—in hunting, eating, drinking and lechery. . . ."

The Scourge had fully realised both the dangers and the importance of the brown-skinned men to the régime. Because they were dangerous he had limited their numbers, first to five hundred and later to an even small number. Because they were important he had guaranteed them personal inviolability, so that for an overseer even to strike one meant death, while, if he killed one, he himself was only allowed to die after a series of tortures so appalling that they must have taxed even the Scourge's mordant imagination.

The men of Van Eyck's race were also granted other privileges, and they were guaranteed comfort, servants and whatever they wanted in the way of food and drink.

"You see, he intended to corrupt us," said Van Eyck. "So he gave us a stake in the system." The Antigiosian paused at that point, then, in a voice charged with self-recrimination, added: "Yes, he meant to corrupt us.

And I suppose I must admit that to some extent he succeeded . . .”

The duties of the brown-skinned men were comparatively slight. They, like the overseers, were also sent mainly to the provinces where they were allotted one to each five districts, living comfortably in small habitations attended by several women of their own race. There they were expected to act as general advisers, to be called upon by the albinos whenever a problem arose that needed high intelligence for its solution, but there was little doubt that the real reason for thus distributing them was to keep them well separated, and to prevent them combining against their masters.

“Tell me,” said Pollenport, “have your people ever considered threatening the whole social structure by refusing to have sexual relations with each other?”

Van Eyck shook his head. “No,” he said. “We should never take that course, and the Scourge understood us too well to fear the possibility. He knew that a people as proud as ourselves could never contemplate racial extinction.”

Pollenport let the matter pass. “And your imposing hats?” he asked. “I suppose the Scourge thought of them, too?”

“Of course. He invented them, and he intended that they should be the token of our right to live. In fact, that is what they are, and if I lost my hat the first overseer I met would probably run me through with his sword. The hats themselves are practically indestructible. They are made of sheet metal covered with black lacquer and some are even believed to date back to the time of the Scourge himself. There are as many hats as there are of us, and when one of us dies his hat is taken by the overlords, who keep it until one of our women applies for it.”

“How do you mean?”

“When one of our women gives birth to a brown-skinned male baby,” said Van Eyck, “she knows that he

must have a hat if he is to be allowed to live. But, of course, she has no means of knowing whether or not a hat is available. Still, taking the baby with her, she goes to a member of the Senior Hundred—one of the hundred oldest overlords, those that are entitled to wear gold circlets—and asks him for a hat for her son. If there is a hat available he gives it to her and the baby is allowed to live, but much more usually his reply is simply to kill the baby then and there, in front of her eyes.”

“Good God!” exclaimed Pollenport, and was silent for some minutes. Then he added: “But surely in your history there must have been many attempts at evasion?”

“Very many,” said Van Eyck. “But none, as far as we know, successful. Women have fled to the mountains, to the deserts, to the marshes, but either they have succumbed to hardship or they have been caught, in which case the deaths meted out, first to the baby, and then to the mother, are so terrible that I will not describe them. Other women have tried to duplicate the hats, using leather, wood or starched cloth, but there is no record of any having deceived the overseers.”

“But what about the women who work as blacksmiths?” Pollenport asked. “Haven’t they ever managed to make an exact copy of one of the hats?”

Van Eyck smiled sadly and shook his head. “Metal is precious in this land,” he said, “and every ounce of it has to be accounted for by those that handle it. It would be impossible for a woman to steal enough of it to make a hat, quite impossible, but——”

He broke off and glanced apprehensively at the overseers as if he feared they might suddenly have acquired a knowledge of English.

“Go on,” murmured Pollenport.

“Well, it’s only that there is a tradition among the women to the effect that the mother of a brown-skinned son once was

successful in duplicating a hat," said Van Eyck, in a low voice. "That's to say, they believe there's now one more hat in existence than the number decreed by the Scourge and, consequently one more of us. Possibly. I don't know. And anyway it all happened more than a hundred years ago. They say that the woman freed four of the slaves and made the hat from the metal of their clamps——"

An overseer lurched by them and once more Van Eyck hastily broke off, and would not return to the subject even when the overseer had gone.

"A fairy story, almost certainly," he muttered. "And a dangerous one. If the overseers ever caught the least suspicion of it, we should be counted and—and—if there was any discrepancy—one of us would pay for it with his life. . . ."

Of course, it was the Scourge who had conceived the idea of keeping the slaves in clamps, and tradition had it that the apparatus was his own invention. "He knew that if the field slaves were free to eat when they liked," said Van Eyck, "there would be a constant drain on the food supplies, and so he was visited by the simple notion of locking their jaws together. He limited neither the slaves nor the women to any specific number, because it was essential for the system he was creating to have the greatest possible amount of production flowing towards the smallest possible number of consumers. If anyone was to be wealthy in this poverty-stricken land it was to be his beloved albinos, with whom he identified himself, although he was not of them, and who, in a way, took the place in his affections of the progeny that he, as a hybrid, could never have."

Van Eyck went on to talk of the lives of the slaves, and Pollenport learned that, for the ordinary clamped slave, there was no such thing as promotion. No ordinary slave could ever become a foreman and, from the day when he left his mother at the age of eight to the day of his death, he

knew no life except that of a toiling, beaten, half-starved helot; and in the end, when he had become too old to work, the district overseer killed him.

The foremen fared slightly better. They were the sons of overseers by their favourite mistresses, and they were permitted to stay with their mothers until they were thirteen or fourteen. Then they were apprenticed to adult foremen and presently became foremen in their own right. Although, free from the clamps and better fed, their physical misery was less than that of the slaves, their mental anguish was even greater, for they spent their lives in terror—terror of the slaves on the one hand and terror of the overseers on the other. Those that tried to dragoon the slaves met with strange and usually fatal accidents, and those that treated their charges with anything approaching leniency fell foul of the overseers, which meant at least a thrashing and sometimes death.

Even so, some of the foremen survived to earn their masters' trust and approval, and then they were promoted to the ranks of the livery slaves, working either as personal servants to the district overseers, or in the habitation or as grooms; and when they became too old to work, they were not killed as were common slaves, but were turned loose, and usually ended their days skulking about the cliff-city, fending off starvation as best they might.

"And the women?" asked Pollenport. "What becomes of them in their old age?"

"It depends," said Van Eyck. "The Scourge's conception of the duties of womanhood has come down to us in a phrase of two words which can be translated, although not perhaps precisely, as—Fertility and Servility. A woman who has worked well at her craft and who has given birth to a great many hybrids and girls will be permitted, in her old age, to continue to live in the city, inhabiting the cliff dwelling she has always occupied, and her daughters will see

to it that she is properly fed and looked after. But the women who have been barren, or nearly so, and those that have only given birth to a succession of brown-skinned boys that have had to be killed because there were no hats for them, or those women that have been lazy or slipshod in their work—for them there is no comfort in their old age. The overseers drive them out of the city, and usually they find their way to the seashore, where they live miserably in caves, subsisting on scraps of fish and offal.”

“I understand,” murmured Pollenport, thinking of the two old women he had seen at the foot of the cliffs nine or ten months before, when the *Skylark* was on its way to the metropolis; and he asked Van Eyck why it was that the slaves dragging the sled had saluted the women with their forearms covering their eyes.

“Ah, that is something you’ll quite often see,” said Van Eyck. “The overseers try to stamp it out, but it persists. You see, the first eight years of a slave’s life are as near as he ever gets to happiness, and he continues to revere his mother—and, to some extent, all women—for as long as he lives. That is why they salute the women, particularly the older women, and perhaps also, when they salute them, they do it to defy the overseers. At least, that is what I like to think. . . .”

The more Pollenport considered the enduring tyranny that the Scourge had created, the more he was revolted by the infamy of the mind that had conceived it, this system of oppression eked out by petty corruption and niggardly bribes. “And there’ve been no attempted revolutions?” he asked.

“None,” said Van Eyck, with a bitter smile. “Who would make a revolution? We handful of brown-skinned men, isolated from each other, and constantly under the eyes of the albinos? Or the women, nearly every one of whom first becomes pregnant while still hardly more than a child

herself, and whose first pregnancy is followed by twenty or thirty more? Or the slaves, those dejected and quarrelsome creatures?"

"It would have to be the slaves," said Pollenport, thoughtfully. "But, of course, with the help and guidance of your people."

Van Eyck shook his head. "No, Professor Pollenport," he said. "It is clear you do not understand the nature of the slaves. They are hybrids and they are sterile. They have no wives and no progeny, and the only future that can interest them is the next meal. They have no communal spirit, and it is hardly conceivable that they should have, since each one is a—a——" He broke off, and glanced at Pollenport. "What is the phrase you once used to describe a hybrid?"

"A biological cul-de-sac," said Pollenport. "But even so it seems incredible that there should be a society of perhaps a million creatures unable to free itself from the tyranny of five thousand oppressors."

"It may seem incredible, but it is the case," Van Eyck told him. "And I can assure you that that is exactly as the Scourge planned it. He knew that the system he had constructed would never stand in any danger from those it oppressed, but he had serious doubts about the albinos' ability to keep it in working order. Serious doubts."

"Yes?"

Van Eyck nodded. "He adored the albinos, but he had no illusions concerning their energy and their intelligence. He knew that they were stupid to the point of imbecility, and he realised that as soon as he was gone his régime would start to crumble. He had promulgated a code of law, but he had no means of putting it on record. The albinos' powers of memory were rudimentary, and, even if the Scourge was capable of conceiving a system of writing, it would have been useless to expect the albinos to learn it, and so for a time it must have seemed to him as if his life's work had been

in vain. But only for a time. He found a solution to that problem just as he had for all the others."

"I get it," said Pollenport. "He taught your people the law and ordained that it was to be recited every day?"

"Yes," Van Eyck agreed. "Our people have good memories, and the Scourge presently saw how he could make use of them. As you've just suggested, he taught my ancestors the law word by word and so framed it that it could be recited within the thirty hours of an Antigean day. He decreed that every brown-skinned man be allotted a particular day of the year when he should take his turn at giving forth the very ordinances that our people so abominate. And if ever a day were missed the most senior man among us was to be tortured and killed."

Van Eyck pointed towards his compatriot who could just be discerned gesticulating among the shadows, and went on: "According to tradition no day has ever been missed. For over two thousand years one of us has stood up there every day promulgating the detestable law—every day, that is, except when volcanic eruptions have prevented it, when the law was recited at the nearest practicable point."

"I suppose you have to take your turn once a year, do you?"

"Yes, of course," said Van Eyck. "My next turn will come in exactly eighty-three days' time, and a few days beforehand I shall go away to a special habitation in the hills where five of our seniors are constantly employed in rehearsing those whose turn to recite is approaching. It is there, too, that our youths are taught the law and, of course, everything takes place under the eyes of overseers."

He added that while the Scourge was working on his scheme for the preservation of the law he had come to the conclusion that five hundred as the permitted number of brown-skinned men was unnecessarily high, and with characteristic economy he had reduced that number to two

hundred and ninety-two, one for each day in the year, plus a reserve of fifty to cover the minors and infants. . . .

The Scourge's declining years were troubled, like any other dictator's, with the question of the succession. He knew of at least half a dozen albinos who envied him his position almost to the point of attempting usurpation, and he was well aware that as soon as he died each of them would make some endeavour to take control. Civil war would almost certainly result, and the Scourge's life's work would perish in the conflict before it had ever had time to mature.

His problem was to find some method of putting the succession for ever out of the overseers' reach, and it was perhaps in the solution of this problem that he reached his ultimate in subtlety and cunning.

"You see," said Van Eyck, "he had no son to succeed him. He was a hybrid and sterile. Yet, since it was unheard of for any overseer to be celibate, he had, in middle life, gone through a form of marriage with the least stupid albino woman he could find, a woman some thirty years his junior. And when in extreme old age he solved the problem of the succession he assembled all the overseers within the walls of this cavern and addressed them.

"He told them that his work was finished, and that the time was nearing when he would rest from his labours. He would die, as other men died, and his body was to be thrown into the crater of the volcano, where he would sleep peacefully as long as all went well in the land.

"However, although he was about to die, his widow would live for ever, and all power and authority would be vested in her. She was to have the guardianship of any steel whips awaiting a claimant, and she was to attend all final bouts between albino youths, and if any questions arose beyond the power of the Senior Hundred to solve they were to be referred to her. Finally he warned them that if ever her authority was questioned or her life imperilled she would

call to him and he would visit the land with fire, flood and plague, until her enemies had learned their lesson. He said no more, but dismissed the overseers, and within less than a year he died."

"And his widow?"

"She's still alive," said Van Eyck, with a faint grin. "You've seen her several times—the old woman in the palanquin."

"Nonsense," said Pollenport, and asked him to elucidate.

Van Eyck spread his hands. "Well, we are told that she has lived ever since," he said, "but, of course, the Scourge was no fool, and he understood the albino women; and he knew something of their smouldering indignation at the way they were treated. After all, like every other ruling-caste child, he had been brought up in the zenana, and he had interested himself in all that went on around him, and what he learned was something he was never to forget. Think of it, five thousand married women and any number of unmarried cooped up in a habitation no larger than this, and every woman sullenly resentful at being isolated from the outside world! Oh, the Scourge knew what he was doing when he made his widow his nominal successor. He knew that once the women had been given that single scrap of authority—or, rather, that recognition of their social existence—they would never relinquish it. And, of course, they haven't. The Scourge said that his widow would live for ever and the women have seen to it that she has—and as often as she has died they have found a substitute, and so on down to this day." Van Eyck paused, then added: "Of course, the Scourge realised that her counsel would never be sought by the Senior Hundred, because they would rather die than admit that a woman might know better than them. And yet all these precautions—these checks, safeguards and balances—weren't enough to ensure the system's security."

"No?"

"No. Within twenty years of the Scourge's death the structure had started to disintegrate, succumbing partly to the overseers' indolence and partly to their pugnacity. They quarrelled and fought among themselves, they neglected their provincial duties and became careless in their supervision of the slaves. Twenty or thirty of my ancestors, men and women, threw off the authority of the albinos, fled from the metropolis and established themselves in a distant valley; and the whole history of this land would have been different except for the accident of a volcanic eruption."

"This volcano, I take it?"

"Yes. According to the legends, it was in continuous eruption for forty days. At the same time, mighty earthquakes shook and rent the land, and the skies were as black by day as by night. Hundreds of albinos died in the habitations, and those that survived fled, with the rest of the population, into the desert away from the sea of lava and the rain of ashes. Then they remembered the Scourge's warning and told themselves that this was their punishment.

"So the Scourge's law was re-established, and when eventually the albinos were able to return to this habitation, they found one end of this cavern choked by huge blocks of rock that had fallen from the roof; and in their terror they fancied they could discern the features and figure of the Scourge amongst the rocks as if he had returned to preside over them for ever. From then on they placed the Giver of the Law between the idol's knees and the superstition grew that, if ever again disaster threatened, the Scourge would speak anew to them through the gestures of the Giver, warning them."

"I understand," said Pollenport. "And that, I take it, is why, when we were brought to the metropolis, all the albinos congregated at the base of the idol. They were expecting the Scourge to say something about us, were they?"

"Yes. But when nothing was said they came to the conclusion that you were harmless."

"I see. And what's their attitude to us now?"

"None," said Van Eyck. "Their memories are short, and it must seem to them almost as if you've been here for ever. To all intents and purposes, they've forgotten you. But the slaves haven't."

"What makes you say that?"

"The slaves are uneasy and restive," said Van Eyck. "When you first came into the habitation they thought you intended to poison the overseers, and were content to wait. But since then many months have passed, and the slaves are still in bondage. They are baffled and angry."

"But why are they so certain I've come to liberate them?" Pollenport asked. "And, anyway, why me, in particular? Why not Paul or Sam?"

Van Eyck smiled. "Professor Pollenport, when a people are kept for a long time in subjection and ignorance, many legends and superstitions arise among them, and almost invariably those legends deal with the manner and method of their liberation. Among the hybrids, one school of thought favoured the idea of a gigantic fish that would come out of the sea and devour all the albinos, another believed in a flight of grey birds whose droppings would turn the overseers to stone, and a third told of a mythical animal that would descend from the clouds into the mountains and kill all the albinos by poison. This animal was described as having a thick black mane and eyes of crystal. Well, you have black hair and a lot of it, and you wear spectacles. Clearly, you were the animal!"

Pollenport grinned. "I think I could have dispensed with the compliment," he murmured. . . .

PART III

THE BALLOON GOES UP

(i)

IN the east there was a long line of hills, smoky blue against the darker blue of the sky. For the rest there was nothing except marshes and swamps, pools of standing water and bald patches of mud, and in the midst of this desolation a man moved, stumbling along a ridge of sodden spongy turf, limping badly and keeping his eyes on the ground as though he were looking for something.

It was almost midday. The sun was directly overhead and the man was walking in his own shadow. He noticed that, and it was as much sense of time as he had. He didn't know whether he had been stumbling across this desolation for days or weeks or months, and only knew that he had been struggling eastwards for a great length of time. Before the marshes there had been a desert of sand-dunes, before that a rocky plateau cleft with canyons and gorges, and infested by a race of hirsute creatures almost like monkeys, yet able to make and use primitive weapons and tools; and, before that, mountains. . . .

His brain was remarkably clear, and his memory streamed back from it into the past like a pennant. The months of imprisonment—the crossing of the straits—the northern continent—the *Skylark*—the journey through space. And so on, back to his childhood. He knew, too, that his name was Stewart McQuoid.

Hunger and memory—that was as much as his consciousness consisted of. He was purged of emotion and the future held for him neither hopes nor fears. He had no desires

except hunger, and it was hunger that drove him eastward towards the hills, which might harbour more animal life than the marshes. The only animals he had seen among the swamps and pools were huge slugs—black, a yard long, and as thick as a man's thigh—and yellowish scuttling creatures, like rats without fur and with soft slimy skins. He had killed one of these with his stick, but its corpse gave off a nauseating smell and he had recoiled from the idea of eating it.

He was nearly a skeleton and half-naked. The remnants of what had once been a pair of khaki shorts fluttered about his hips, and his shirt would have been disdained by a scarecrow. Rain, wind and sun had made leather of his skin; his hair had not been cut since he left the northern continent more than a year before; and his cracked lips were framed by a long straggling beard.

His feet were bare, and his fractured left leg had mended so badly that the two ends of his shin-bone almost seemed to overlap, forming great lumps on the leg as if they were just about to break through the skin. His limp gave him a lurching crab-like gait, and after every other step there was a perceptible pause before he could bring the fractured leg forward again.

He walked with a stick, leaning on it heavily, and every now and then, in places where black water started to ooze up around his feet, he paused and cautiously tested the ground ahead of him. A few days before he had stumbled into a bog of foetid mud and had only extricated himself after a long struggle; and then had found his legs covered with transparent leeches fattening and slowly turning crimson with his blood.

There had been a day of fog and rain, when he had lost himself amidst a maze of swamps unable to find either a surface firm enough to bear him or water deep enough to swim in, and he had spent that night lying flat on his back.

in the mud lifting each limb in turn to prevent himself sinking; and from time to time reciting "The Road to Mandalay" to keep himself awake.

Today progress had been good, and he reckoned that in spite of his limp he had covered a dozen miles since day-break. He even allowed himself to think that the distant hills were now perceptibly nearer; and as he gazed at the low line of rounded peaks it suddenly tilted, darkening, and the whole landscape up-ended itself, spinning round his head.

He felt himself slide forward into a void of darkness, and the thud of his body as it hit the ground seemed to hang in the blackness as if it were a point in his experience beyond which he could not pass. . . .

He came round quickly, momentarily puzzled to find himself staring into a miniature forest of rank grass with one side of his face pressing into the damp turf. He raised his head and gazed about him, examining the emptiness of the silent desolation as if it were something new and unfamiliar.

"You fainted, old lad," he muttered, and had to fight against a desire to giggle.

He rested for a while, then dragged himself to his feet and set out once more towards the hills. Presently he came to a broad stretch of dead water, barring his path, and he hesitated to swim it, wondering what would become of him if he lost consciousness again. The pool was at least a mile wide. Northwards, it stretched towards the horizon as far as the eye could see, and to the south there were acres of swamp-land and mudflats, channelled by numberless water-courses.

McQuoid gazed at the farther shore and decided to risk it. He floundered hastily through the soft mud fringing the pool and plunged into the water with his stick held between his teeth.

The sun had not been long enough on the water to warm it, and a foot beneath the surface it was as cold as ice. He

swam as vigorously as his strength permitted, and drank some of the water as he swam. It had a taste that made him think of the smell of dungeons, a musty earthy taste, but he had drunk gallons of the marsh-water in recent weeks and was used to it. Every muscle in his arms and legs was aching before he was a quarter of the way across, and he turned on to his back to rest. He took the stick out of his mouth and gazed up at the clear sky where a number of large white birds were wheeling. He had often seen flocks of these birds and several times he had thrown his stick at them in the hope of bringing one down, but, of course, had never succeeded.

It needed a considerable effort to resume swimming. A leaden weariness weighed down upon his arms and legs, yet he was still just able to make them answer to his will, swimming so slowly that each stroke seemed to be a separate and individual enterprise. He could feel his heart beating with a ponderous slowness, and the daylight seemed to pulsate in rhythm with the throbbing in his ears.

He was a little more than halfway across when he realised that he could never swim to the farther shore. The realisation came to him as a fact, as something that could not be argued or fought against, yet he kept on swimming, because by the tenets of his philosophy one never gave in, and he knew that even to take another rest would be to surrender. If he stopped swimming now, it would be for ever.

He struggled on, fighting against water that had acquired the density of mercury and the viscosity of glue. His strokes became feeble and uncertain, and twice his head went under, filling his mouth and nostrils with water. His impression of darkness deepened, veiling the brilliant sunshine, and the throbbing in his head began to dominate his consciousness, as if soon there would be nothing left of his being except a pulse beating in an infinity of darkness.

He was about three-quarters of the way across. He tried to sustain himself with the thought, but it was no use. His lungs were losing the power to draw breath, he had finally exhausted his strength and his limbs were dangling in the water like mere appendages of empty flesh. The darkness was closing in rapidly now, so clouding his mind that his reflexes ceased to function, and when his head sank beneath the surface he experienced nothing of terror, and was conscious only of a peaceful feeling of relief and dis-embarrassment.

The sensation was short-lived. A physical impression of pebbles and sand against his foot forced its way into the isolating darkness, and the message it conveyed struck through his body like an electric shock. His foot had touched bottom, and he was within his depth!

He kicked weakly—somehow found the strength to do so—and his head broke surface. He gasped and spluttered, spewing out water, and managed to choke enough air into his lungs to fill them. The water was above his waist, almost up to his arm-pits, and he had to move his arms about to keep himself upright.

He rested for several minutes, gulping air and trying to regain control of his breathing, and then waded slowly towards his stick, which was floating on the water a few yards in front of him. There was no mud to contend with, and the bed of the pool was firm and gritty, as if it were formed of sand or gravel.

It took him some time to reach the shore, and once he was out of the water the weight of his body was insupportable. He collapsed on the turf and lay there, feebly moving his arms and legs in his efforts to restore circulation.

The position of the sun told him it was now well on into the afternoon, and his inclination was to spend the night where he was. Any further progress he made in his present state would hardly be enough to count, but on the other

hand there was the question of food. Unless he found something edible soon, he would be at the end of his tether. He would die out there on the marshes, within sight of the hills.

Presently he struggled into a sitting position and looked about him. He could see the hills clearly now that the sun was in the west and he noticed that one of the peaks was crowned with a plume of smoke, which suggested that the country ahead was volcanic. With little knowledge of local conditions and no scale of comparison it was almost useless for him to try to estimate distances, but his guess was that the hills were now not more than fifteen miles away. If that were so, he should reach them on the morrow, or the day after, depending upon what obstacles he had still to negotiate.

He drove his stick into the ground, and by means of it dragged himself to his feet. The muscles of his legs ached and twitched, but he forced himself forward and, as before, kept his eyes on the ground. The terrain on this side of the pool had more the character of low-lying meadows than actual marsh, but, although the likelihood of finding edible vegetation was increased, McQuoid wouldn't let the fact encourage his hopes. He had become resigned to starvation as a gambler becomes resigned to losing, and he was already half-persuaded that his luck wouldn't turn.

So much so that when after only a hundred yards or less he came upon what he was looking for, he refused at first to believe his eyes. He stared at the little group of plantain-like plants and dared not let himself think they were identical with the edible plants that had sustained him for so many weeks on the other side of the marsh.

He counted five of them and, trembling, he grabbed the nearest one by its leaves and pulled it from the ground. When he recognised the familiar tap-root, purple in colour and as large as a carrot, he was seized by such sensations of

relief that for a moment he was as helpless as if paralysed, and an eternity seemed to pass before he found the strength to strip the root of its fibres and wash the soil away in a puddle.

He ate three of the roots and left the others for the following morning. He had made up his mind not to go any farther that day and, when he finished eating, he prepared himself for sleep, kneeling on the ground with his body thrust forward and his head cradled in his arms. Since leaving the desert it had become his habit to sleep like that, with his vital organs protected both from the sodden ground and from the chill of the night air. . . .

(ii)

IT was darker than night in the recesses under the great rocks that formed the idol, and although Pollenport had an electric torch with him he dared only use it with extreme caution. Out in the cavern there was still a dozen or so overseers, and he could not be certain that they all slept. Also he had to move slowly and smoothly so that the overseers should not get wind of his activities by means of their antennæ.

He had his haversack with him, and in it were a number of cartridges charged with blasting powder. This was his third visit to that place, and every now and then the light of his torch picked out the marking labels of charges he had set previously. It was becoming difficult to find suitable crevices and crannies and, of course, in the circumstances it was impossible to use a drill.

Pollenport's plan for blowing up the idol was not a gamble he could afford to lose, and on the whole he felt that his chances of success were good. According to his calculations, there was only one rock that had to be shifted for

all the other rocks to come hurtling down. That single rock, leaning between the floor of the cavern and its wall, and forming the trunk of the idol, appeared to be the key of everything, and it was along its base that he had set his charges.

It took him over an hour to complete his work that morning, and when he crept out from behind the rocks he found Van Eyck waiting for him, hidden among the shadows at the idol's side.

"Paul wants to see you," the Antigeosian whispered. "Urgently."

"Where is he?"

Van Eyck waved towards the draped bench just visible by the light from the bonfire, then led the way to it, making a wide detour to avoid disturbing the sleeping overseers.

Paul was finding it difficult to contain his excitement and, as soon as he saw Pollenport he started forward and clutched his arm. "What do you know, Jonah?" he whispered. "I think McQuoid's turned up!"

"McQuoid? Good God!"

"Well, there's a rumour going around that a party of slaves have found a human being out on the marshes," said Paul. "Sam's gone to investigate, and I came to fetch you. I told Sam we'd meet him at the *Skylark*."

"Good," said Pollenport, and glanced at Van Eyck. "Coming with us?"

"Please," said the Antigeosian, and the three of them moved off towards the cavern's egress. Since it wasn't easy to talk as they threaded their way through the darkness of the narrow tunnels, they had to wait until they were on the raft before Paul told them what had happened.

"Sam and I spent the morning working on the balloon as usual," he said. "Two or three of the women were helping us, and we had a vague idea that something out of the ordinary was agitating everyone, but we didn't take much

notice. There seemed to be quite a bit of hither and thither, and a lot of chatter was going on in the gesture language, but we just supposed it was all on account of some Antigean affair we wouldn't know about. Then one of the girls who knows a few words of English started pointing towards the west and saying: 'Man. Man there. Hungry,' and we were trying to get it sorted out, when an overseer came riding up in a state of some excitement. He waved his whip and roared, and managed to make it clear that he wanted us to go somewhere with him. Naturally, Sam and I weren't too keen, and we were still arguing the toss when Bianca appeared on the scene. She's the woman who really can speak some English, and she interpreted for us. 'Slaves find man on marshes,' she said. 'Man like you. No food. He dead——' "

"Dead?" echoed Pollenport, interrupting Paul. "Why didn't you say so before?"

"Let me finish," said Paul. "Of course, Sam and I thought of McQuoid at once. 'You're sure he's dead?' we asked, and Bianca nodded. 'Yes, very dead,' she said. 'Quick or too late,' and then it transpired that what she really meant was that he was ill and dying——"

"I see," said Pollenport, as the raft moved out into the daylight. "What's Sam taken with him?"

"A medical pack. Brandy. Milk. . . ."

The raft drew up at the landing-stage and they jumped ashore.

The open space in which the *Skylark* stood was deserted. Everyone, it seemed, had trooped out on to the marshes to witness McQuoid's rescue and silence hung over the cliff city like a cloud. The *Skylark*, still resting on its sled and with more than a year's dust coating its hull, looked forlorn and lonely, and around it were littered all the materials and apparatus that Sam and Paul had been using to make the balloon.

Work on this project of Sam's was by now fairly far advanced, thanks to the fact that they had had a great deal of help with it. Once the overseers had been told by Van Eyck that the earth-people were planning to depart from their land, they had shown themselves markedly in favour of the project and had taken a considerable amount of unflattering interest in the making of the "sky-raft". They watched Sam and Paul laboriously sewing and double-sewing the spindle-shaped pieces of silk together and, to hasten the leave-taking, directed a number of women to give all the assistance they could.

As a result the irksome task of making the envelope of the balloon had hardly taken three months, and now it only needed a dressing of varnish for it to be finished. The women had also supplied most of the cordage required, and were engaged in the making the net of the balloon to Sam's specification. The wickerwork gondola was also under construction in one of the workshops, and Sam was hoping that the balloon would be ready for its first test within a couple of months.

Pollenport sat himself down on the timbers of the sled and tugged thoughtfully at the untidy growth of beard that now graced his features.

"My God, think of it, two thousand miles," he muttered.

"What's two thousand miles?" Paul asked.

"Why, the distance that McQuoid must have come," Pollenport told him. "I've been studying the local geography ever since Sam first evolved his balloon project, and from what Van Eyck tells me it must be at least two thousand miles from here to the peninsula. My guess is that it will take us something like three months by sea when we're ready to shift the balloon and all its gear—and McQuoid presumably did the whole distance on foot, and across some of the most desperate country the mind can conceive."

"Terrible country," Van Eyck confirmed, nodding his

head slowly. "Many years ago forty of our overseers, attended by a thousand slaves, went on a hunting expedition in that direction. But they found nothing in the way of game and only twenty-three of the original forty survived the trip. And fewer than a hundred and fifty of the slaves. Starvation accounted for the rest and the overseers were reduced to eating the slaves' food. They brought back tales of marshes infested by huge slugs and leeches, of deserts so intemperate that men died of heat by day and of cold by night, and in the mountains they were set upon by tribes of hairy cannibals so powerful that they could twist a man's head off with their bare hands."

"H'm, it sounds as if McQuoid must have had quite a trying time of it," said Paul. "One has to hand it to the old so-and-so—he's got guts."

"Tenacity," said Pollenport, nodding. "McQuoid is one of the kind that never abdicates."

"I guess he's going to be pretty mad with us," Paul murmured. "I mean, when he hears we've been here more than a year and haven't so much as raised a finger to rescue him."

Pollenport shrugged. "We've had our problems, too," he observed. "And if he cuts up rough I shan't hesitate to remind him that to our way of thinking he's a murderer."

He glanced up at the sun, which was struggling to shine through a misted sky. "It's past midday," he remarked. "They're taking a long time."

"Yes," said Paul, yawning. Then, feeling that he might as well make himself useful while waiting, he got up and strolled across to a small pile of machine parts and started to sort them into some kind of order.

"What have you got there?" Pollenport asked. "The pedal generator?"

"Yes. Sam and I spent the morning dismantling it and carrying it down piecemeal."

It was Sam's intention to make the hydrogen needed for the balloon by electrolysis, and it was for that that he needed the generator.

Van Eyck suddenly pointed towards one of the defiles. "I can sense much movement in that direction," he said. "I think it must be the city dwellers returning," and as he spoke Pollenport heard a faint rustling noise, the sound of hundreds of bare feet, padding over the baked ground.

Two minutes later an overseer came riding out of the defile and headed towards the *Skylark*. Behind him came four slaves bearing a litter so simply constructed that it was hardly more than a large stretcher. Sam walked beside the litter, and in its wake came a numerous crowd of women and children, and a few slaves.

The man on the stretcher was scarcely visible. A blanket covered his body, and this was as motionless as if he were dead.

"It looks as though Sam was too late to save him," said Paul, but Pollenport didn't reply. He got up and started out to meet the little procession.

The slaves became mildly excited, exchanging glances when they saw Pollenport, and for a moment he feared they were going to drop the litter and rush to him, but the overseer wheeled on them, flourishing his whip, and they quietened down.

Pollenport glanced at the litter, and now he could just see McQuoid's nose, white where the bone pressed against the drawn skin, and as sharp as a nose in a death mask.

"Is he alive?" he asked Sam.

"He was the last time I looked at him, five minutes ago. But only just."

Pollenport gestured to the slaves to put the litter down, then stooped and drew the blanket back from McQuoid's skeletal body. He stared at the man's stick-like arms, jutting ribs and dry leathery skin, and muttered an

astonished: "God . . ." He had never seen a living being so emaciated. It was almost impossible to believe that this shrivelled shrunken form could harbour life, and Pollenport thought of mummified corpses he had seen in the crypts of churches and remembered photographs that had appeared in the newspapers twenty years before, showing the remains of men who had been starved to death in Nazi concentration camps. . . .

He leant over McQuoid and put an ear to his chest.

After a couple of minutes, he glanced up at Sam. "Give me the brandy," he said.

"You can hear his heart?"

"Yes, just." He noticed that Paul was beside him and added: "Paul, find some rope and a blanket, and fix up a sling. We'll have to haul him up into the *Skylark*."

He moistened McQuoid's lips with the brandy and then carefully trickled about a thimbleful into the man's mouth. A few bubbles formed slowly and Pollenport noticed a slight movement of the eyelids.

"That's all I dare do for the moment," he said, replacing the blankets and straightening himself. "I'd say, Sam, that the odds are about a hundred to one against him."

With a wave of his hand, he indicated to the slaves that he wanted them to carry the litter closer to the *Skylark*, then noticed that the overseer had dismounted and was conversing in gestures with Van Eyck.

He joined them, and at the first opportunity asked Van Eyck what the overseer was thinking about it all.

"He supposes that that man is one of your slaves," said Van Eyck.

"My slave? Whatever makes him think that?"

"Because the man is so thin," Van Eyck explained. . . .

THREE days passed and at least twice during that time Pollenport gave McQuoid up for dead.

"I don't see how we can save him," he said, at the end of the second day. "He's incapable of digesting even milk."

That was true and, although McQuoid's pulse and respiration reacted temporarily to the stimulus of brandy, there appeared to be no way of persuading his gastric processes to function.

In the end Pollenport resorted to shock tactics and on the third day Paul came into the control compartment to find his chief stirring a saucepanful of strange-looking liquid over the spirit stove.

"Holy smoke," he muttered. "What is it?"

"Chicken soup, laced with orange juice and halibut oil."

"God, you'll kill him."

"That's possible," Pollenport agreed. "But since he'll die anyway, if we don't feed him, we may as well run the risk of killing him by feeding him. I think we've been handling him too gently, and I'm going to give him a spoonful of this concoction every five minutes until some of it stays down. . . ."

Miraculously, these tactics worked, and a week after McQuoid's rescue there was little doubt that he would recover.

His mind, however, remained clouded, and he spent much of each day lying on a mattress in the control compartment watching Pollenport, but never giving any sign that he recognised either him or his surroundings. Occasionally, he mumbled to himself, and on the tenth day he uttered a sentence clearly enough for Pollenport to catch it.

"Damn it, man, you can't tell me anything about desert warfare. . . ."

That was the sentence, and it served to make Pollenport realise that, while nursing McQuoid, his attitude to the man had undergone a considerable change. In his admiration for the man's tenacity, he had forgotten the arrogant, inhuman McQuoid of former times, and had come to think of him simply as a patient that had to be nursed back to life. Something almost of tenderness had crept into his attitude, but that single boastful sentence, spoken in delirium, was enough to remind him that McQuoid was by no means of the most pleasant of mortals.

The patient's strength began to return, and it became unsafe to leave him alone. His mind appeared to be constantly preoccupied with the Hitler war, in which he had fought as a young man, and his most frequent delusion was that he had been taken prisoner by the Nazis. During the daytime he was usually sullen and bad-tempered, endlessly fretting with his blankets, swearing and muttering, while at night, if given the slightest chance, he would crawl from his mattress and creep about the control compartment, searching for a way of escape.

In a later phase, he became obsessed by the idea that his revolver had been taken from him. Several times a day his hand would go to his hip, as if to draw a gun, and when he found nothing he would become abusive, shouting and screaming.

"Where's my revolver? . . . You've taken my revolver, you swine! . . ." and so on, until his fury was spent, and he fell back on the mattress exhausted and tearful.

These outbursts became so frequent and were obviously doing so much to hinder the invalid's complete recovery that presently Pollenport decided to humour him. He let McQuoid have a revolver, complete with belt and holster, first having had Paul make half a dozen dummy bullets from live ammunition.

After that, McQuoid's convalescence was rapid. He

spent whole days playing with the gun, taking it to pieces, oiling it, reassembling it, loading and unloading it, and apparently he was no longer haunted by delusions. He no longer raved and swore. His sleep at nights became sound and unbroken, and he even began to recognise Pollenport as a benefactor.

His complete return to sanity was quite sudden. One morning he slept longer than usual by a couple of hours, and in the end Pollenport had to wake him to give him some breakfast.

He opened his eyes when Pollenport touched his shoulder and raised himself on an elbow; and Pollenport was almost immediately aware of a difference in his patient's demeanour. He had lost his customary blank, incurious look and, when he glanced round the control compartment, his expression showed unmistakable signs of a puzzled, questioning interest.

"Good God, Pollenport—where am I?" he asked.

"In the *Skylark*," Pollenport told him, and hardly dared to breathe lest McQuoid's memory desert him again and his expression lose its intelligence.

"But—but, dammit, I was struggling across some marshes . . ."

"That was six weeks ago. We found you and brought you here. You've been ill."

"And how came you to be here?"

"It's a long story," said Pollenport. "And you'd better have some food."

McQuoid sat up and his hand happened to knock against the butt of his revolver.

"Good Lord," he muttered. "Have I taken to sleeping with a Colt?"

"Yes. You were delirious for a time and insisted upon having a revolver. I thought it as well to humour you."

"H'm, rather a dangerous experiment, I should have

said," McQuoid muttered, then unbuckled the belt and put the gun on the floor at his side.

Pollenport had it on the tip of his tongue to tell him that the gun was only loaded with dummy ammunition, then thought better of it, reflecting that as soon as McQuoid was up and about he would probably continue to carry the revolver, in which case it would be better if it weren't loaded. After all, McQuoid had already shown himself to be over-hasty in his use of firearms.

"No, you were very sensible," Pollenport murmured. "Of course, we were careful to keep an eye on you."

"We? Who else is here?"

"Sam Spencross and Paul Greenwood."

"What about your daughter? And young Penn?"

"They're all right, as far as I know. But, look here, you must have some breakfast and afterwards we can chat to our hearts' content. . . ."

McQuoid ate a large breakfast that morning, and with every minute it became clearer that he was now practically a well man. His unkempt appearance bothered him, and he was manifestly relieved when his kitbag was discovered to be still on board the spaceship. Paul brought it to him, and he dressed himself in a clean shirt and clean shorts, and Pollenport offered to cut his hair and trim his beard for him.

"I've become rather adept at it," he said, and although McQuoid seemed inclined to doubt this he obediently sat himself on a packing-case and let Pollenport swathe him in a towel.

McQuoid talked while Pollenport cut his hair. He had no gift for story-telling, words came to him with difficulty, but it gradually transpired that his experiences of the last year or so fell into three periods—one long period of considerable boredom sandwiched between two periods of intense hardship.

"As you probably know," he said, "I had a spot of bother

in getting away from the other continent. A handful of those footling Antigeosians tried to obstruct me. Had to shoot one, and the others scattered. I hope the incident had no unfortunate repercussions for you."

"As a matter of fact, it had," Pollenport informed him coldly. "But carry on."

"Well, I got away all right after that. In the rubber dinghy, of course. I realised I was in for a rough passage, but I badly underestimated the time it would take. I had a favourable wind, and I thought I could make the crossing in about fifteen hours. That's to say, I calculated I should only have to weather two of those infernal tidal waves, but I was very wrong. Rather. In fact, I was in that damned dinghy for at least thirty hours. Probably more."

"And the tidal waves?" Pollenport asked.

"Bloody unpleasant, of course," said McQuoid, "but I know something about the kinetics of waves, and I wasn't particularly alarmed. I knew that the waves could no more damage the dinghy than a tornado could burst a ping-pong ball. Each time a wave was due I lay flat in the dinghy, strapped myself in, lashed my provisions to the floats, filled my lungs and waited. Amazing experience, of course. At one moment you're floating on a comparatively calm sea, and at the next you're riding up a wall of water as if you'd been shot out of a gun. Noisy, too. Naturally. And on the second or third occasion I got caught up in the crest of the wave and found it damned embarrassing. Difficulty in getting my breath, you know. As a matter of fact, I came out of that spot of bother upside down, but I was prepared for that. You can right those dinghies in a twinkling if you know how to go about it."

Apparently, the end of the voyage was an unmitigated nightmare. Half a mile from the shore a submerged rock tipped the dinghy from end to end and it sank at once, taking McQuoid's provisions with it.

"It was a pretty fair sample of hell, getting to the beach," he said. "Not straightforward swimming, by any means. Kept coming to shallows, you know—only a foot or two of water covering rocks that were as sharp as knife-edges where they weren't slimy with seaweed. Damn it, I must have been floundering and crawling about for the best part of an hour. Ugly combers kept racing towards the shore, knocking me down, dragging me over the rocks, and somehow or other I lost my revolver. Spent ten minutes searching for it, but my luck was dead out, and when I finally got ashore, by Jove, I must have looked more like butcher's meat than a human being. To say that I was lacerated from head to foot is to put it mildly. My clothes were in ribbons, my watch and compass smashed, my holster empty and the only thing that had survived more or less intact was my water-bottle. And, by God, I was glad of it."

After that, he found himself confronted by a dismal wall of black cliffs that stretched on either side as far as the eye could see. "I saw no sign of any natives," he told Pollenport. "In fact, there was nothing except the dreary cliffs, but I was too exhausted to trouble much about the view, so I dragged myself up the beach until I was practically under the cliffs, and fell asleep."

"To this day, I don't know whether I slept for two hours, twelve or twenty-four, but it was anyway broad daylight when I awoke, and now that I had rested the cliffs didn't seem quite so forbidding. In places they were not more than two or three hundred feet high, and I decided to have a shot at scaling them."

However, McQuoid's luck was still out, and when he was only twenty feet or so above the beach he slipped and fell heavily, breaking a leg. "Of course, in the circumstances, that was a pretty poor show," he said, "and I no longer had any choice in the matter but to stay on the beach. I dis-

covered I could hitch myself along after a fashion—you know, in a sitting position, levering with my arms, kicking with my sound leg and dragging the other. Painful proceeding, particularly at first, but I didn't intend to stay where I was for the rest of my life."

He found a piece of driftwood on the beach. It resembled bamboo and, since it was the first piece of wood that he had ever seen on Antigeos, its discovery seemed miraculous. He managed to split it with a stone and used the two pieces as splints, strapping them on to his leg with his belt.

"I also used one of the splints as a calendar," he said. "Scratched a notch on it for every sunrise. Forty-five notches in all. Not bad, eh?"

"Good God!" exclaimed Pollenport. "You mean to say you were on that beach for six or seven weeks?"

"Oh, yes, definitely. In fact, probably rather more. I became a little muddled in my head towards the end and hadn't the sense to keep the records up to date."

"But what the deuce did you eat?"

"Shellfish, mostly. The rocks were covered with limpet-like molluscs and I ate those. Tough as blazes, but probably quite nourishing. I also found winkles and, occasionally, small crabs. And when times were hard, I ate seaweed. Of course, I kept on the move, hitching myself along, and on a good day I daresay I covered as much as a mile."

Then something McQuoid ate poisoned him, and the poisoning produced all the symptoms of dysentery. "I had a lot of fever, of course," he told Pollenport, "and I became so weak it was an effort even to move an arm. In fact, there was nothing for it but to lie under the cliffs and hope for the best. Hallucinations bothered me, you know. Regimental dinners and that sort of thing—invariably functions where there was plenty to eat and drink. Only trouble was I was expected to make a speech before I could have anything to eat, and I was always too weak to stand up." He gave a

short dry laugh, then went on: "Exactly how it all ended I can't say. I've a hazy memory of some dwarfish brown-skinned men surrounding me and jabbering a lot. Gesticulating, too, and later I was to discover that these chaps, unlike the people in the North, had both types of language and used them in combination. They had antennæ, of course."

It was McQuoid's impression that he was ill for a matter of weeks, and when eventually his mind cleared he found he was a prisoner. His prison was a cave set in the cliffs, with a small opening looking out over the sea, and a larger one that was the entrance.

"I was lying on a bed of dried seaweed," said McQuoid, "and a couple of fellows were standing guard at the entrance. Little chaps but with the chests and shoulders of baby gorillas, and they were armed to the teeth. Flint knives stuck in their belts and massive great clubs in their hands. In fact, in view of my gammy leg and considering I was as weak as a kitten I felt they were rather over-doing it until it dawned on me, much later, that they weren't as much interested in keeping me in the cave as in keeping certain other types out. In other words, they were protecting me."

It seemed that McQuoid's captors were primitive to a degree. They numbered only a few hundreds, and they had the use of neither fire nor metal. They lived almost entirely on fish, spearing it in an inlet of the sea that became a shallow lake at low tide.

"And it was a damned hazardous proceeding," said McQuoid. "I mean, the Antigean tidal system is a deucedly complicated business, and, of course, these chaps had no inkling of the connection between it and the moons. They had no way of measuring time and, whenever they went out spearing fish they were in constant danger of being overwhelmed by a tidal wave. Twice in those early weeks I saw that very thing happen and on the first occasion two fellows were drowned and on the second, three.

"As a matter of fact, some of the natives held me responsible for these disasters—thought I was an evil spirit, and wanted to have me put to death—but they were in a minority, and it was from them that I was being protected. The rest considered me a god sent specially to help them in their troubles, and I suppose they argued that I should naturally need a little time to get the hang of things.

"Every morning three or four of the elders used to visit me, pointing to the sea and obviously wanting to know if it would be safe to go fishing that day, and it wasn't long before I had them eating out of my hand. My watch was smashed, but I could tell the time by the sun to within half an hour or so, and that was near enough to keep tabs on the tidal waves. By Jove, Pollenport, in the end they reposed so much confidence in me that I had them out fishing by moonlight—a thing they wouldn't have dreamed of doing before."

"And how did your leg get on?"

"It set, but so badly as to be useless. So I broke it again."

"What do you mean?"

"Broke it," said McQuoid. "Put my leg over a rock and gave it a hefty tap with a stone. As a matter of fact, it snapped quite easily, and then I set to work on it in earnest. I had already prepared some new splints, and I bound them in place with fish-skin thongs, which the natives supplied. Then I took to my seaweed bed and lay there until the leg had mended." He glanced ruefully at his crooked shin and added: "In fact, with all those advantages, I should have made a better job of it."

"You were lucky not to get gangrene," said Pollenport.

"Yes, I suppose so," McQuoid muttered, and then went on to remark that it was during those weeks of boredom that he had conceived a scheme for getting in touch with Pollenport.

"It was a crazy idea if ever there was one," he said, "but I daresay I was still not quite right in the head. Anyway, as I think I told you, I still had my water-bottle, and my plan was to put a message in it and fling it into the sea, on the off-chance of it finding its way to you. Oh, yes—rather. At the time I was entirely serious about it, and solemnly scratched a message on a scallop-shell, put it into the bottle and had the natives throw it as far out to sea as they could. Good God, what a fool! Why, the odds against it washing up on the northern continent must have been millions to one."

He laughed, and Pollenport laughed, too, while hoping fervently that McQuoid wouldn't ask him if he had ever received the water-bottle. It had just occurred to him that a lot of ill-feeling and recrimination could be avoided if McQuoid remained unaware of the truth, and he made a mental note to warn Sam and Paul not to speak of the matter.

"And how did it all end?" he asked.

"Oh, very tamely. Nothing succeeds like success, and when it had become obvious to all and sundry that my predictions regarding the tides were invariably right, the opposition faction just faded out. Consequently, there was no longer any need to keep me guarded, and I was allowed to come and go as I pleased. In fact, I lived practically as one of the tribe."

"Weren't they afraid you might desert them?"

"Oh, I don't suppose the possibility ever so much as crossed their minds," said McQuoid. "After all, looking at it from their point of view, why should I desert them? By their standards, I was on velvet, and not even their head man was treated with as much respect as me. I lived in one of the largest, driest caves in the place. I was given the choicest fish—invariably raw, of course—and absolutely nothing was required of me except tidal prediction. Well, I simply waited until my leg was as good as it ever will be, and then

sloped off. I left by night, of course, striking inland and taking with me a fair supply of dried fish."

Pollenport chuckled. "You've certainly got a most remarkable capacity for survival," he murmured, at which McQuoid shrugged indifferently and, in the same matter-of-fact unemotional way, went on to tell of his long journey across mountains, deserts and swamps. . . .

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NO doubt it was imagination on the part of Sam and Paul, but to them McQuoid's advent seemed to bring with it a curious pervading tension. They saw comparatively little of him after the first week or so of his recovery, and the few glimpses they did catch of his lean limping figure as he went to and fro in the cliff-city filled them with uneasiness. Their apprehension made them more conscious of the volcano smouldering above the city, they once more became aware of the frequent earth-tremors and rumblings, and they found the misty airless days more oppressive than ever.

"It'll be a great day for me when we can get out of here," said Paul.

"Me, too," Sam muttered, and, without saying much more on the matter, they intensified their efforts to get the balloon ready, until they were working each day from early dawn to late dusk. They felt like men struggling to pitch a tent before the storm breaks.

McQuoid's activities were obscure and mysterious. He lived much as he had lived on the northern continent, spending his days investigating and exploring, taking notes and making sketch maps, and only returning to the *Skylark* to sleep. Pollenport had told him something of local

history and culture, and it might almost be said that McQuoid had fallen in love with the country. The orderliness and smooth working of the social system had a strong fascination for him, the albinos intrigued him, and nothing could persuade him that they were not wiser and more profound than any terrestrial men.

"He'll get a shock if, he ever finds out what Jonah's planning," said Sam.

"Yes, but how can he find out?" Paul asked, and the subject dropped.

In fact, Sam had touched on a matter in which he and Paul were not in agreement. Paul believed that before they left the continent, they should attempt to do something to lessen the power of the overseers. He argued that if they went away without even trying to strike a blow for the brown-skinned men and the hybrids, they would have it on their consciences for the rest of their lives. He was dubious about the prospects of Pollenport's plan, but he strongly approved of it in principle.

Sam took a more conservative view. While not going so far as to maintain that it was unethical to interfere in the internal affairs of another planet, he believed that more harm would come of the attempt than good, and he thought it madness to risk their chances of escape on a scheme which even Pollenport admitted could be little more than a gesture. "It's all very well, Jonah," he had said, "but do these brown-skinned people really want to overthrow the system? They may talk a lot about the iniquities of the albinos, but, beyond embroidering a few rude words on the overseers' belts, what do they do about it? As revolutionaries, they seem a poor old lot to me. They've no vision, no programme and no impetus. Take old Van Eyck—he thought he could do wonders by learning English and teaching it to the women. He said it would run like wildfire through their ranks, then they'd teach the

brown-skinned men and conspiracy would start in earnest. That was months ago, and how far have they got to date? About a dozen women with a smattering of English, and even they can't muster more than a few dozen words between them. I don't doubt that the brown-skinned people would like to be free, but they haven't the will to do anything about it."

Pollenport nodded. "The system's corrupted then," he agreed, "and I'm pretty certain that if ever the albinos are overthrown it will be by the poor damned hybrids, but there's nothing in what you've just said that absolves us from trying to do something about it. If we can only frighten the overseers into allowing the number of hats to be increased to, say, a couple of thousand we shall have achieved a great deal. In fact, we shall have sown the seeds for a real revolution at some time in the not too distant future."

Sam had not found this convincing, but, with Pollenport and Paul both opposing him, he had been in the minority and had submitted with a fairly good grace. Later, however, in conversation with McQuoid, he had been indiscreet enough to refer to Pollenport's plan and, although he had done so in good faith, under the impression that Pollenport had already discussed the matter with McQuoid, his conscience had been uneasy ever since, and he found himself constantly wishing he could remember exactly what he had said. Probably not more than: "Of course, whether we shall get away all right depends entirely upon what success Jonah has with his project. If that goes wrong, I can see us all being quietly dropped into the volcano." But naturally it had been enough to awaken McQuoid's suspicions, and he had glanced at Sam sharply.

"What project?" he had asked.

"Why, the whole thing," Sam had said vaguely, suddenly realising that he was on dangerous ground, and then

he had pointed hastily to some greyish-looking substance in a leathern bucket near-by.

"Ah, that's the stuff I was talking to you about," he had said. "You know, for making the balloon impermeable. Amazing stuff. The women render it down from birds' nests—you know, like Chinese soup—and use it for water-proofing cloth."

But McQuoid had limped away and Sam had spent the next few days in an agony of suspense waiting for Pollenport's wrath to descend upon him. However, nothing of the sort had happened. McQuoid had apparently decided against making a direct approach to Pollenport, and Sam found this reticence peculiarly unnerving. When he remarked to Paul that it would be unfortunate if McQuoid discovered Pollenport's plan, he had been on the verge of confessing his indiscretion, and then somehow had not had the temerity to proceed.

"Anyway," he said, "in another three days we shall be out of this damned cliff-city."

"Sure," Paul murmured, without looking up from his work. He was busy cleaning the pedal generator's dynamo, for he and Sam had now come to the final stages of their preparations and were spending what time remained to them in checking, cleaning and testing every detail of their equipment.

It was Sam's intention to take the balloon out into the desert for testing, and he had already chosen the site. It was about eight miles from the cliff-city, at a point where the river broadened and where it flooded its banks at the rainy season. There was a certain amount of vegetation there and a small settlement of field slaves, living in man-made caves like dug-outs, but there were no trees or high rocks, or anything that the balloon might foul during its tests. The pedal generator, the hydrogen plant and the component parts of the balloon were to be dragged to the site on a sled

and, later, after a number of test ascents had been made, all the equipment would be loaded on to rafts ready for the long sea voyage to the northern peninsula. . . .

The sound of a raft bumping against the landing-stage made Sam look up from his work, and he saw McQuoid step ashore and glance about him. "Old McQuoid seems to be spending a lot of time in the habitation these days," he remarked.

"Yes, just to be near those darling albinos, I guess," said Paul, watching McQuoid as he limped towards them, a spare soldierly figure in khaki shirt and shorts, and with the inevitable revolver on his hip.

"Have you seen Pollenport?" he asked, as he came up to them, and his voice sounded unusually strained as if he was struggling to control some powerful emotion.

"I thought he was in the habitation," Paul told him.

"The habitation? Dammit, man, I've just come from there."

Paul glanced up at the spaceship. "Then he's probably in the *Skylark*," he said. "We haven't seen him for hours."

McQuoid turned away and moved stiffly towards the *Skylark's* rope ladder. He started to climb it, dragging his injured leg as he climbed.

"He seems a bit mad about something," Paul murmured.

"That was my impression, too," said Sam, and his conscience started to trouble him afresh. . . .

Pollenport was in the spaceship's control compartment. He had a set of accumulators and a detonating-plunger at his side, and he was sitting on his mattress patiently disentangling a quantity of flex.

He glanced up as McQuoid emerged from the communication shaft and greeted him with a friendly: "Why, hullo, McQuoid," but his friendliness wasn't reciprocated. In fact, McQuoid seemed almost paralysed with anger and seconds passed before he could speak.

Then he jerked out a hand and Pollenport saw that in it lay a blasting cartridge.

"Look here, Pollenport," he blurted out, "I—I found this in a crevice at the back of the idol."

"Oh yes?" Pollenport murmured, gazing interestedly at the cartridge.

"Yes, and I take it you know something about it."

"Of course I do. As a matter of fact, I put it there."

"Then I think in all fairness you owe me an explanation."

Pollenport dropped the flex he was holding and shifted himself from the mattress into a deck-chair. "All right," he said. "Yes, let's talk things over. In fact, I've been meaning to have a discussion with you for some days."

He motioned McQuoid towards a second deck-chair and, after a brief hesitation, the other man sat down.

"Have you, now?" he said coldly. "Well, it will be interesting to hear your reason for not taking me into your confidence before matters reached this stage," and he nodded towards the cartridge in his hand.

Pollenport ignored the remark. He was silent for some minutes while he came to the conclusion that it would be advisable to tell McQuoid of the project in detail, and when he spoke again he approached the subject from a different angle in an attempt to remove it from the sphere of their personal relationship.

"As you know," he began, "social conditions in these parts are pretty appalling. A small tyrannical clique holds down the vast majority of the population by force, and rules it with incredible brutality and cruelty. Well, quite frankly, I intend to modify their rule. You may say that it's impossible, that any arbitrary and external interference with an historical process can only produce a future chaos even worse than the existing order, and perhaps in many circumstances you'd be right. But in this particular case, whether I like it or not, I'm already involved in the historical process."

The hybrids, as I explained some time ago, believe in me as their heaven-sent liberator and they are waiting, with mounting impatience, for me to set them free from their bondage. Revolution is in the air, but as long as I'm here I don't think the slaves will attempt to rise. As long as I'm here they will assume that I'm making my plans and that in my own good time I shall dispose of the overseers.

"On the other hand, if I leave here without taking some action on the slaves' behalf, anything could happen. The slaves would feel deserted and frustrated, there would probably be a series of desperate risings, which the overseers in turn would ruthlessly suppress. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes," said McQuoid. "There'd probably be quite a bit of trouble. Mutiny and that sort of thing. But, if you ask me, those overseer fellows would be perfectly capable of handling the situation. I should say they're an efficient lot when it came to law-enforcement."

"Yes, I'm sure," said Pollenport, drily. "The slaves, ignorant and without organisation, wouldn't stand a chance. They'd be slaughtered in their thousands, the land would run with blood, and that carnage is something I intend to prevent. That's why I've no choice but to go ahead with my plan."

"Which is?"

"To overthrow the idol and change the law," Pollenport told him. "That blasting cartridge you found is only one of several. Tomorrow morning I'm going to smuggle this plunger into the habitation and conceal it in a recess towards the back of the cavern. The next day it will be followed by the batteries, and I've allowed two days for the laying of the flex and the wiring-up of the charges. Then everything will be set for the overthrowing of the idol, and at that point I shall join Paul and Sam in the desert where we shall test the balloon. If the tests go off all right we shall be ready to act."

"But, good God, Pollenport, you can't blow up the idol without killing any overseers that happen to be around at the time. The cavern is never completely deserted."

"Let me finish," Pollenport murmured. "The destruction of the idol is only one part of my plan, the other part is to change the law. When we return from the desert we shall still have to wait a few days until one particular day when a friend of Van Eyck's will be giving out the law."

"I've met this man and he strikes me as being an extremely keen and reliable character. Van Eyck and he have had a number of clandestine meetings, and everything has been arranged to take place on the day when it's his turn to give out the law. In the early evening of that day he's going to break off his routine gesticulations and hold the pause long enough to gain every overseer's attention. Then, behaving as if the Scourge was using him as a medium, he will declare an emergency and tell the overseers that they must leave the cavern for the space of two hours, warning them that any who fail to do so will be killed. We shall make the Scourge tell them that during the two hours the law will be suspended, but that when they return to the cavern they will learn of certain changes that are to be made in the law."

McQuoid looked sceptical. "Not very likely, is it, that the overseers will take any notice?" he muttered. "Probably all that will happen is that they'll seize Van Eyck's pal and put him to death."

"Oh, nonsense," said Pollenport. "To imagine that anything like that could happen is to underestimate the power of the law. No, I can assure you that the overseers will be terrified, and that they'll obey, but if they don't we shan't hesitate to blow up the idol even at the risk of killing a few. Anyway, assuming that all goes well, the cavern will be left deserted except for Paul and myself, who will be hidden behind rocks at the back of the cave with the

plungers and the batteries. We'll then blow up the idol, and we've allowed ourselves two hours in case anything goes wrong."

"I see. And you reckon that when the overseers come back and find their idol in pieces, they'll be considerably impressed?"

"Naturally. And Van Eyck's friend will climb up on to one of the fallen rocks and promulgate the new law."

"Which, you have already written?"

"Yes, with Van Eyck's help. Actually, the changes are very moderate," said Pollenport, and he went on to explain that he felt certain that the overseers, however frightened they were at first, would not long tolerate any legislation that they could recognise as being directly against their interests.

"So to gain anything at all we had to be moderate," he said. "For instance, I very much doubt if the overseers would have stood for freeing the slaves from their clamps, and they certainly would have reacted violently against any attempt to prohibit relations between them and the brown-skinned women. However, although they're a cunning lot, they're by no means intelligent, and it's most unlikely that they understand the full implications of some of their other laws, and it was upon those laws that we decided to concentrate. For example, I'm fairly certain that no overseer could say exactly why the behatted men are limited to under four hundred or why they're forbidden to communicate with each other, and I'm confident we can change those laws without any particular objection on the part of the overseers. In fact, we've decided to increase the number of the hats to two thousand and to repeal the law that prevents the behatted ones from talking to each other. Of course, these reforms sound very modest indeed, but in my opinion the ultimate effect will be tremendous. Two thousand brown-skinned men, with the support of the hybrids will

soon prove themselves more than a match for five thousand dumb albinos.

"So far so good, but there was still the problem of the slaves. They had to be helped and, since total emancipation wasn't practicable, Van Eyck and I worked out a considerable amount of legislation designed to ameliorate their lot. I won't go into details, but the main points are to increase the slaves' rations to double and to put a stop to the killing of the slaves who are too old to work. Again, it's not much, but it's probably as much as the albinos will stand for and, I hope, enough to prevent abortive risings after I've gone." He paused briefly, then added: "Well, there you have it—my plan in outline."

Both men sat silent for a little while, and Pollenport noticed that McQuoid's face was flushed and his expression disapproving.

When the silence had lasted for perhaps ten minutes, Pollenport murmured. "Any comment?"

"None," said McQuoid, "except that I'm entirely opposed to the whole project."

"On what grounds?"

"Simply on the grounds that the scheme is impracticable and starry-eyed," said McQuoid. "Here you have a social system that is both balanced and efficient, and yet you want to overthrow it for no better reason than that it doesn't conform to certain terrestrial notions of liberal government. ~~In~~ my opinion, you've become the prisoner of your own woolly idealism. Take the hybrids, for instance—what's the point of trying to equate them with human beings when in fact they are only beasts of burden? Really, Pollenport, what you're trying to do is on a par with overturning a beehive simply because some of the bees have a thin time of it. And anyway, quite apart from all wider considerations, your plan is poorly conceived even in its technical aspects. It's fuzzy and badly integrated. You overthrow the Scourge,

and substitute—what? Nothing. I suppose the overseers are to assume that the new law comes to them from nowhere?” He paused momentarily, then added, in a voice that barely concealed his fury: “And, damn it all, what you’re attempting to do isn’t merely silly, it’s dangerous! Dangerous from the point of view of the Antigiosians and dangerous from our point of view. If you fail, as you most certainly will, we’ll all get our throats cut!”

Pollenport was about to reply when his glance happened to meet McQuoid’s, and at that moment it suddenly came to the two men that they were so angry that they could no longer stay in the same place without coming to blows.

McQuoid stood up abruptly and limped towards the exit hatch. “Better discuss it later,” he muttered, and lowered himself into the shaft.

Pollenport gave him time to reach the ground, then he too got up, and went across to the lucidex. More than a year’s dust and grime coated the spaceship’s hull, and the view he had of the outside world was dim and blurred, but he could just distinguish McQuoid’s figure as he walked stiffly towards the hills and away from the habitation.

Satisfied, Pollenport turned away from the lucidex and sat down on his mattress. He took up the flex and resumed the work of unravelling it, while pondering McQuoid’s reaction to his plan.

A few minutes later, Sam came into the control compartment, and sat down in one of the deck-chairs.

“What’s bothering McQuoid?” he asked, speaking with a carefully assumed casualness.

“He found a blasting cartridge behind the idol,” Pollenport told him. “And naturally he wanted to know what it meant.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Everything. In the circumstances, there didn’t seem to be much sense in keeping anything back.”

"How did he take it?"

"Not at all well, as you can imagine," said Pollenport with a smile. "But I'm not particularly worried. After all, however fiercely he opposes me, there's not much he can do. He's got no means of communicating with the overseers, and in any case he hasn't any standing in their eyes. They're firmly of the opinion that he's a slave, and I don't intend to disabuse them."

Sam was silent for a minute or two. He sucked thoughtfully at his pipe, although it was empty, for he had long ago smoked the last of his tobacco; and presently he murmured: "You don't think he'll try anything in the way of direct sabotage? I wouldn't put it past him to muck about with the detonating plant."

Pollenport shrugged. "We can keep our eye on him," he said.

"But when we're out in the desert?"

"Van Eyck will be here. Besides, there's no damage that McQuoid can do that we can't repair."

"No? It'd give you something to think about if he chucked all the blasting gear into the river."

"Oh, no, Sam, that's not like McQuoid. He's a subtle old so-and-so, and he's only likely to resort to violence when he's certain to come out on top. If he broke with us completely he'd be in the soup and he knows it. I'm not worried."

"Well, I am," Sam muttered. "And I wish to God your conscience would let you leave this benighted hole without more ado."

Pollenport laughed quietly and shook his head. "Nonsense," he murmured. "If you were in my shoes, I can't see you letting the slaves in for a holocaust. You don't suppose, do you, that they would accept my betrayal of them without protesting violently?"

"Oh, well—perhaps not," said Sam. "And, anyway, you're the boss. . . ."

MCQUOID'S attitude to the balloon project was somewhat sardonic. He watched the other three packing the equipment on to the sled with amused detachment, and it was not at all as if he realised that the balloon also represented his only chance of escape from the southern continent.

"You won't change your mind and come with us into the desert?" Pollenport asked, when everything was ready.

"No, thanks," said McQuoid. "I think I'll stay here. As you know, this place has quite a fascination for me." His gaze roved over the cliffs surrounding them, and he added: "In fact, I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my life here."

The remark troubled Pollenport, and the thought occurred to him that if the man really meant what he said, the situation was more dangerous than he had suspected. If McQuoid was in fact indifferent to the possibility of returning to the northern continent and, later, to the Earth itself, there was no common interest between them, and McQuoid might feel himself free to sabotage Pollenport's project to his heart's content.

"By the way," said Pollenport, "we never resumed our discussion of that scheme of mine."

"No," said McQuoid. "On thinking it over, I decided to let the matter rest as it was. After all, I don't suppose I could argue you out of your opinion, and I'm certain you couldn't argue me out of mine."

There was precious little comfort in that observation, and Pollenport sought out Van Eyck.

"I'm worried about McQuoid," he said. "Up to now I've always believed that we had enough in common to prevent him being drastically obstructive. But now I'm no longer so sure."

"Yet there is nothing that he can do," Van Eyck murmured. "He cannot talk to the overseers and, in any case, I shall be watching him. If he attempts to go behind the idol, I've only to tell the overseers and they'll reprove him."

"You mean they'll kill him?"

"That's the form their reproof usually takes," Van Eyck agreed. "But in this case, as they consider him your slave, they would probably bring him to you for you to kill him."

"An awkward situation, if it ever arises," Pollenport remarked, then added, after a pause: "Well, if he starts getting up to mischief, you'll send me a message by one of the women, won't you? After all, we're only a couple of hours away. . . ."

The next morning the laden sled, drawn by thirty slaves and followed by the three space-travellers, started off on its journey into the desert.

Small parties of women and children turned out to cheer it on its way, and McQuoid watched its departure from the top of one of the cliffs. The sky was unusually clear that morning, and the sun shone from it with a hard bright intensity, and with such fierce heat that there might almost have been an immense invisible burning-glass poised in mid-air, concentrating the sun's rays on the cliff city.

The sled disappeared from view along a defile, and presently McQuoid made his way down the cliff face by means of a narrow stairway cut into the rock. He noticed with disapproval that Sam and Paul had done nothing about clearing away the litter surrounding the *Skylark*, but did not disdain to borrow one of their deck-chairs. He dragged it into the spaceship's shadow and sat down.

On the other side of the open space he discerned Van Eyck sunning himself on some rocks and waved a languid hand in that direction.

Van Eyck came to him.

"You beckoned me, Major McQuoid?" he asked.

"No, I greeted you."

"Oh, excuse me," murmured Van Eyck, moving away. "Terrestrial gestures are rather inexact from the point of view of the Antigean mind, and sometimes it is difficult to tell one from another."

"I see, but don't go away. Bring that other chair over here and sit down."

Van Eyck hesitated for a moment, then did as McQuoid suggested. This was the first time that McQuoid had shown any serious interest in him, and his curiosity was aroused.

A deep, almost inaudible rumble shook the air, and a moment later the earth shuddered violently enough to bring a few small boulders and stone, crashing down from the cliff tops. The *Skylark* rocked visibly, making the timbers of the sled creak, and McQuoid clutched the sides of his chair and made as if to get up.

"It's nothing," Van Eyck murmured. "An earth tremor."

"But an unusually bad one?"

"We have many worse in the course of a year. We hardly notice them."

The rumbling died away after about five minutes, and McQuoid, shading his eyes, looked up in the direction of the volcano. "I suppose it's my imagination," he said, "but there seems to be an unusual quantity of smoke coming from the crater."

"No, it is simply that the air is clearer today. There is no haze or mist, and you can see the volcano more distinctly."

"Anyway, it's pretty well dormant, isn't it?" said McQuoid. "Pollenport tells me there hasn't been a bad eruption for something like two hundred years."

"That is so. There was a small eruption some sixty years ago, when I was a child, but it was nothing. Ashes and smoke darkened the sky, but we didn't even leave the city."

There was silence for some minutes, until McQuoid said suddenly: "Van Eyck, tell me something about the albinos' spiritual life. Mysticism interests me. Tell me about their religious beliefs, and their metaphysics and systems of philosophy."

"There is virtually nothing," Van Eyck told him. "They have, of course, some vague ideas about the continued existence in another form of the historical figure we call The Scourge, but that is all. Why, the hybrids have more spiritual life than the overseers."

"But that's nonsense," said McQuoid. "I refuse to believe that five thousand men can control a population of a million or more without access to powers and techniques of a supernatural order. Dammit, it's beyond credence, no matter how well counter-balanced the various material forces may be."

Van Eyck shook his head. "I'm afraid, Major McQuoid, that you've no conception of how minute the mental capacity of the albinos actually is. They're abominably stupid and, of course, in a way their stupidity is their strength."

"No, no," muttered McQuoid, impatiently. "I just don't believe that they're stupid. To be frank with you, I believe you've allowed yourself to be influenced unduly by Pollenport's ideas. Pollenport no doubt classes himself as an intelligent man, but he hasn't the sense to let well alone. In his view, such a course is invariably silly. It's unprogressive. Reactionary. Far better to turn the world upside down on the off-chance of its being nicer the new way up. That's the intelligent thing to do and the people who would leave well alone are, of course, stupid."

"Leave well alone, Major McQuoid?" said Van Eyck, and his voice trembled as he repeated the words. "A million half-men slaving from morning till night with their jaws clamped together? Scores of babies slaughtered

every year? Our girls debauched and humiliated? Are these things well enough to be left alone?"

"Oh, I've no doubt Pollenport has taught you the jargon all right," said McQuoid. "But—be frank with yourself, Van Eyck—had these matters ever worried you before Pollenport infected you with his starry-eyed nonsense? Had you ever considered the hybrids as anything other than beasts of burden? And is there anything so horrible about the despatch of infants too young to know what's happening? As for the young women——" McQuoid sniggered—"well, isn't the female attitude to rape notoriously equivocal?"

Van Eyck was too offended to reply. He started to get up, but McQuoid stopped him, saying: "No, let me finish. I want to talk to you about this desperate project of Pollenport's."

"Yes?"

"Well, why involve yourself?" McQuoid asked. "What can you gain by it? Ten to one it will fail, and if that happens I dread to think what your fate will be. But even if it succeeds, what then? A disturbance of the sort you're planning is more likely than not to have totally unforeseen results. If the tremendous forces that the present system holds in balance get out of control anything can happen, and, without the authority of the law to guarantee your safety and your comfort, what would become of you? Good heavens, man, be realistic, and help me nip this thing in the bud! Surely if you and I put our heads together we can find a way of persuading Pollenport to reconsider the matter."

Van Eyck shook his head and intimated that he did not wish to go on with the discussion. "There is no point in our talking," he said. "Quite clearly, you have no understanding of the depth of our misery and humiliation. Because our women laugh and dance and wear gay clothes, you think they are happy. Because we men, the behatted ones, have no

choice but to be submissive, you think we are resigned. But you are wrong. The passing of time may have vitiated our will to be free, but none of us is happy, and few are resigned. Even if Professor Pollenport's plan fails, our people will take new courage from the fact that it was attempted at all; and, if it succeeds, it will be the beginning of the end of the albinos' rule."

McQuoid shrugged. He decided it was hopeless to try and influence Van Eyck, and when the Antigiosian rose to go he made no further attempt to stop him.

In fact, for the next two days the two men did not speak to each other. Van Eyck kept out of the way, spending most of his time at the top of the cliffs, from where he could keep an eye on both the spaceship and the entrance to the habitation; and when it grew dark he went down into the cliff-city, staying the night, as he always did, in the cave of a friend. He was not much interested in McQuoid's behaviour once the sun had set. He knew that if McQuoid were really planning to sabotage Pollenport's arrangements, he would hardly choose to do so by night, when the habitation was crowded with albinos.

The two days passed uneventfully, and during that time McQuoid did not even enter the habitation. He passed the time reading, meditating and wandering restlessly about the cliff-city, and in the late afternoon of the third day Van Eyck happened to meet one of the women on the cliffs who told him that the Limper—which was McQuoid's appellation in the gesture language—was looking for him.

Van Eyck went down to the spaceship and waited. McQuoid was nowhere about, and the open space was filled with mounted overseers straggling towards the habitation in twos and threes. The last of them had cantered by before McQuoid turned up and Van Eyck noticed that he looked unusually hot and flustered:

"Ah, there you are, man," he muttered, breathlessly.

"Good God, I've been looking everywhere for you. Where the deuce have you been?"

Van Eyck did not reply. He treated McQuoid to the faintly contemptuous glance that he normally kept for the albinos, but McQuoid was busily mopping his face and didn't notice it. He leant against the sled to get his breath back, resting there for some minutes while the dusk deepened perceptibly and the light of the setting sun, reflected on the cliffs, softened to red.

"Well, Van Eyck," said McQuoid, at length, "my mind's made up."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I've decided there's nothing for it but to inform the overseers of Pollenport's plans."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Naturally with your help."

"No," said Van Eyck, then noticed that McQuoid's hand was resting on his revolver, and understood.

"Yes," said McQuoid, and pointed towards the river. "Go on."

Van Eyck was about to repeat his refusal, telling McQuoid that he would rather be shot than act as interpreter, when it suddenly occurred to him that McQuoid would have no means of knowing whether or not he was being interpreted correctly.

"Go on," said McQuoid again, and this time he half drew the revolver from its holster.

Van Eyck walked reluctantly across to the landing-stage, with McQuoid limping along at his side, and when they came to the river McQuoid thumped his chest impatiently, to summon a raft.

Van Eyck, unpractised in falsehood, stood there wondering how good a liar he could be. For a long time, Pollenport had had difficulty in believing that a language could exist in which it was almost impossible to tell lies, but Van Eyck

had convinced him 'in the end, and then Pollenport had decided it was a matter of conditioned reflexes. He had supposed that the reflexes governing manual gestures were perhaps harder to control than those connected with the vocal chords, which would explain why an Antigoesian, conditioned from babyhood to answer every question truthfully, had greater difficulty in lying; and, as a corollary to that proposition, Pollenport had reminded himself how often terrestrial liars gave themselves away by involuntary gestures that contradicted their words.

On the raft, McQuoid sat immediately behind Van Eyck and, as the tunnel's darkness engulfed them, he leaned forward and said softly: "You think I'm a fool, don't you, Van Eyck? You think you will be able to interpret me as saying anything you like and I'll never know, don't you? Well, if that's what you think, I'm afraid you're unlucky. You've picked on the wrong man. I've spent my life among natives, and I've an instinct for this sort of work. I know when a native's lying or whether he's speaking Arabic, Swahili or double-Dutch. And I suggest you bear that in mind."

Van Eyck said nothing, and neither man spoke again until they reached the great cavern.

The overseers had not started their evening meal. Most of them were reclining on their rugs, drinking and talking to each other in gestures. Torches blazed and spluttered, and the flames of the bonfire roared upwards through the smoke to meet the stalactites in the roof.

Several of the albinos stirred when they caught sight of McQuoid and Van Eyck, and McQuoid peered through the murky atmosphere until his gaze came to rest upon one of the Senior Hundred—a fat, bland-looking man, naked, of course, except for his belt and circlet, and with a body so white and unscarred that he looked more like a sportive banker than a warrior and hunter.

"Take me to that chap," McQuoid whispered to Van Eyck. "Tell him that I've something of the utmost importance to say to him."

The plump albino rose as they approached and greeted Van Eyck with an abrupt interrogative gesture. He fastened his gaze on McQuoid, and there was nothing in his expression to suggest that he took a favourable view of this interruption in his evening's repose.

Hastily, Van Eyck addressed him in gestures. "This man," he said, "who, as you know, is the slave of Crystal-eyes, says that he has urgent information for you. In my opinion, he is mad."

The overseer's hand moved to the hilt of his steel whip, and the movement was not lost on McQuoid. He reacted by gripping the hilt of his revolver.

"What did you tell him?" he asked Van Eyck, sharply.

"I interpreted your message," Van Eyck murmured.

"All right. Now tell him that he and all the overseers stand in very great danger of a catastrophe. Tell him that Pollenport is planning to overthrow their god and to establish a new law of his own making. Tell him that Pollenport's ultimate objective is a general uprising of the slaves."

Several overseers were now looking on, and Van Eyck hesitated to address them. The fat member of the Senior Hundred looked mildly puzzled and asked, in a gesture: "What does this limping slave say?"

"I hesitate to interpret," said Van Eyck, "because not only does he seem mad, but also blasphemous. He has made certain predictions, but they are so outrageous and disagreeable that I am reluctant to translate them."

The overseers exchanged uneasy glances, gesticulating amongst themselves, and then the fat albino gestured curtly: "Translate."

Van Eyck lowered his eyes. "Forgive this terrestrial

slave's presumption," he said, in slow deliberate gestures, "but he asserts that all of us in this land stand in great danger. He predicts that all we hold most sacred—" he glanced up at the idol—"will be overthrown and destroyed. He prophesies that a new law will be set up, that there will be a mighty uprising of the slaves and that disaster will overwhelm the land."

The consternation caused by these remarks was considerable. More and more albinos joined the little group around McQuoid and Van Eyck, gesticulating and grunting, with the firelight reflecting in their red terror-stricken eyes, and their jaws working rhythmically, as they did at times of emotional crisis. McQuoid noticed that several of them looked nervously up at the idol as if expecting an immediate catastrophe, and these glances satisfied him that he had been faithfully interpreted.

"That's shaken them," he muttered, and then was alarmed to see that some of the overseers were glaring at him threateningly, raising their whips.

He glanced at Van Eyck: "What do they think they're doing?" he asked.

"They are angry. They say that your prophesies are blasphemous."

"My God, but Pollenport's the blasphemous one!" McQuoid exclaimed, then an idea struck him and he added: "I say, you made it quite clear that Pollenport is behind all this, didn't you?"

Van Eyck hesitated for only the fraction of a second before saying: "Yes," but it was enough to convince McQuoid he was lying.

"Damn you, I'll shoot you for that!" he muttered, and drew his revolver. The nearest albinos fell back a few paces when they saw the gun, and McQuoid was quick to seize the advantage. He turned from Van Eyck and faced the senior albino. He pointed first to the idol and then to

the draped bench where Pollenport usually sat, and repeated the gestures several times in a desperate effort to make the albino understand that it was Pollenport who was planning to destroy the idol.

The overseer glanced at Van Eyck uncertainly, and gesticulated. "Is Crystal-eyes concerned in these blasphemies?" he asked.

Van Eyck tried to say, "No," but his hands stayed stubbornly at his sides, and McQuoid turned on him.

"What did he say?"

"He asks if Pollenport has had anything to do with this business," said Van Eyck, miserably.

"Then tell him 'Yes'. Go on. I know the gesture for 'Yes'. Go on, tell him!"

He pushed the muzzle of the revolver into Van Eyck's side. The overseers grunted angrily, and Van Eyck raised his hands. Reluctantly Van Eyck gestured 'Yes', and another volley of threatening grunts broke from the albinos.

McQuoid gripped Van Eyck's arm. "Tell them I'll show them the evidence of Pollenport's magic!" he said, almost shouting. "Tell them to come to the back of the idol with me. . . ."

Van Eyck translated quickly, and a roar of fury greeted the suggestion. By now all the albinos were crowding round, shaking their whips and gesticulating. The place was alive with movement, and only a few scattered phrases reached Van Eyck's antennæ intact. He caught the word "Kill . . ." repeated many times, and "Kill the desecrator! . . . Kill him as a bearer of evil tidings! . . . Kill all the foreigners . . ." and a jostling mass of naked bodies forced its way between him and McQuoid.

There was no wall near, nothing that McQuoid could get his back against. He retreated towards the bonfire, getting so close to it that the overseers, naked as they were, could

not get behind him. He held them at bay with his revolver, and they formed an angry milling semi-circle in front of him, yelling and flourishing their whips. He shouted to Van Eyck: "Damn you, tell them that if they kill me they're lost! Tell them I've got magic to counter Pollenport's magic! Tell them . . ." But Van Eyck was no longer there, and McQuoid could see nothing but the overseers' bleached bodies and their steel whips glinting in the firelight against a background of smoke, shadow and overhanging rock.

The fire was scorching the shirt from his back. His face was running with sweat and, as the overseers grew bolder, shoving each other forward, the point of a whip pricked his thigh. He shouted: "Get back or I'll shoot!" and sought to make his words intelligible by pointing the revolver at the roof and firing.

There was no explosion. Nothing except a hollow click, and in a frenzy he fired the other five chambers, aiming at the heads of the nearest albinos; and, outraged, heard nothing except five more clicks.

He hurled the gun full into the face of an albino not four feet from him, saw blood burst from the man's nose, then threw himself on his attackers, knocking their whips aside and fighting like a maniac to get away.

They forced him back, jabbing and pricking at him with their swords as if only in play, and blood started to flow from a score of small wounds in his chest, arms and stomach. He fell back by inches, shouting and swearing, and trying to wrest their whips from the hands of his tormentors. His shirt suddenly burst into flames and, as if this was a signal for more violent action, one of the albinos struck him savagely across the chest with his whip and sent him staggering back into the fire.

Agony raced through his body as if he had vitriol in his veins and, screaming, he struggled to get up, but his

efforts brought down an avalanche of hot ashes and blazing logs, half burying him. One after the other the albinos braved the heat and rushed at him, yelling and stabbing him with their whips; and there he died. . . .

(vi)

IT was the silence that impressed the three of them the most—the absolute, almost incredible silence that can only be experienced in a balloon.

Below them, the desert revolved slowly, looking as flat as a plate except at one part of its perimeter where the hills behind the cliff-city were just discernible; and, like a crack in the plate, the river straggled across the desert from rim to rim.

The balloon was about five hundred feet above the ground, and it was captive. A cord ran from the gondola to the ground, where it passed round a pulley fastened to a rock, and then returned to the balloon. By either hauling on the cord or paying it out the crew could make the balloon descend or ascend at will.

All in all, the balloon was a success. It had now been aloft for over two hours, and the amount of gas it had lost was negligible—hardly enough to register in the pressure gauge that had come from the *Skylark*; and Sam was as proud of their achievement as he had ever been of the spaceship.

"It's a bit lop-sided," he admitted, "but so was Montgolfier's, and he made quite a reputation with his. You know, Jonah, I see no reason why we shouldn't make a free ascent tomorrow."

"Why not?" murmured Pollenport. "If tomorrow's as windless as today it should be ideal."

It was evening and, although at that height they could

still see the setting sun, dusk was creeping over the desert like a tide. Sam unhitched the mooring-cord and started to haul on it, helped by Paul and Pollenport.

A crowd of twenty or thirty hybrids stood waiting for them and, as soon as the balloon was low enough for them to recognise Pollenport, they became animated and excited, pointing to him and chattering in gestures. There was a rumour around that he was about to secure their freedom and, although none of the hybrids could say exactly what part the balloon was to play, they were all certain it was going to play some part.

The balloon touched ground gently and Paul jumped out. He grabbed a couple of sandbags from a large pile stacked by the mooring-pulley and dropped them into the gondola. Pollenport and Sam clambered over the wickerwork side, and together the three of them filled the gondola with sandbags and tied the balloon down with ropes.

"You're not going to let any gas out at all?" Pollenport asked.

"I don't think so," said Sam, gazing up at the darkening sky. "The air's as still as can be, and if a wind gets up I'll be awake in a jiffy. It wouldn't take me a moment to get here and open the valve."

The hybrids surged wildly round them, singled out Pollenport and bore him off to his tent. Sam and Paul followed in the wake of the mob and outside the tents they came upon Bianca kneeling beside the camp fire, roasting some lumps of meat skewered on a stick. Bianca spoke a certain amount of English, and they had brought her with them to act as interpreter and to cook for them. Unlike most of the brown-skinned women she had no claim to beauty, but her broad flat face was a true indication of her good nature, and she was invariably cheerful and willing.

"Hullo. I cook," she said, by way of greeting, then

pointed to three or four leather buckets of water. "You wash?"

"Fine," said Paul. "And, Bianca, see if you can rescue Jonah from his worshippers. Tell them that he's tired and has got lots of things to think about. Say that they must go back to their caves or he won't be able to help them."

"Send away, you mean?" asked Bianca, getting up. . . .

They ate, as usual, in Pollenport's tent. It was a square Antigean tent, made of leather, and it was much larger than the two pup tents they had brought from the *Skylark*. They settled themselves comfortably in deck-chairs, and Bianca brought them their food—Antigean wallaby, roasted and garnished with baked beans—but they had hardly started eating when she returned to the tent in a state of some agitation.

"Someone running!" she said. "Across desert. This way."

"But why should it worry you, Bianca?" Pollenport asked.

"Very strange," she said. "Our people never leave city in dark. All slaves in their caves. Overseers never run. Who, then?"

Pollenport got up. "It's probably nothing," he murmured. "But we'd better investigate."

They left the tent and peered across the desert towards the cliff-city. By now it was too dark to see anything, and Pollenport had to rely upon Bianca's extra sense to keep him informed.

"One person?" he asked.

"I think," said Bianca. "And run very fast——" She broke off and, by the light of the camp fire, Pollenport could see her standing absolutely still with her antennæ thrust forward.

She clutched his arm and he sensed that she was terrified. "What is it?" he asked.

"Overseers!" she cried. "Mounted and galloping. Hundred. Two hundred. Even more."

"Now, steady," said Pollenport. "You mean, there's one person running like the wind across the desert, and farth away, a whole host of overseers? On goatback, as Pa says?"

"Yes."

"Well, couldn't they be hunting a runaway slave?"

"In dark? No, no. Never out of habitation at night."

Paul exclaimed: "Here's someone!" and as he spoke a pale figure hurtled from the darkness and fell headlong between their feet.

It was a young girl of fourteen or fifteen, naked except for a short skirt, and she lay on the ground panting as if she would never again breathe easily. Bianca knelt over her, raised her head and muttered something about her being a girl who was famous as a runner. Bianca spoke to her in gestures, but the child was too exhausted to be able to reply.

"I'll get a torch," said Sam, and now Pollenport could hear the faint thunder of hooves as the overseers galloped towards them.

Sam came back with a torch and he shone it on the girl's hands to see if she was carrying a message. Its light fell on something that Pollenport recognised. It was a rectangular piece of slate which he had used when teaching Van Eyck to write, and he picked it up.

Van Eyck was proving to be just as painstaking about learning to write English as he had been about learning to speak it. He had already spent weeks learning the precise values of all the letters of the alphabet, but so far he had never consented to have a formal spelling lesson as such. Consequently, he could spell any word phonetically and almost none correctly, and the message Pollenport read by the light of Sam's torch was not without its peculiarities:

THE OVERSEERS HAV KILD MAKWOID AND AR
KUMMING FOR YU. PROBABLEE TOO FRITEND OV
KONSEKWENSES TO KIL YU AT WUNS, BUT NO
SUMTHING OV YUR PLAN AND AR VEREE ANGREI
ARM YURSELVES AND GET AWAY IF YU KAN.

Pollenport read the message aloud, and its last few words were hardly audible above the row the albinos were making out in the desert. They were yelling and whooping like maniacs, and now when Pollenport looked up he could just discern their mass as a dim wave raging through the darkness not more than a couple of hundred yards away.

Bianca was helping the other girl to her feet, and Pollenport glanced towards them. "Bianca, get that child away from here," he said, "and then come back to us if you can. Paul, Sam—revolvers!"

They had given up carrying revolvers months ago, and the seconds they spent searching for them amongst the kit in Pollenport's tent they were to remember as some of the most frenzied of their lives.

They unearthed the weapons, together with ammunition, just as the overseers were upon them, and then an unexpected thing happened—the charge, which a moment before had sounded as if no power could stop it, seemed to peter out. The shouting died and the thunder of hooves dwindled until there was silence except for the panting of the steeds just outside the tent.

"What's happening?" Paul whispered.

Pollenport peered cautiously out. The camp was choked with mounted overseers, masked and berobed, and all of them were sitting motionless on their steeds gazing upwards in a single direction. "They've seen the balloon," said Pollenport, "and they're a bit overawed. Come on."

He stepped out of the tent and shone his torch on the nearest albinos. They backed away nervously, and then he

directed the torch's beam towards the balloon so that they could see it more clearly and get a real impression of its size and magnificence. He let the ellipse of pale light play over the balloon's quilted silver-grey surface, and he was rewarded by an uneasy restlessness among the overseers, as if a shiver of apprehension had passed through their ranks.

"See if you can find Bianca," he whispered to Paul. "We can't do anything without an interpreter."

But he had hardly finished speaking when he glimpsed Bianca herself coming towards him, moving like a shadow through the darkness.

"What happen?" she asked.

"They're scared of the balloon," Pollenport explained, and then noticed that one of the overseers was advancing in their direction, walking his steed and hooking his whip to his belt as a sign that he had no violent intentions.

"Let's get our say in first," Pollenport whispered to Bianca. "Ask him what's the meaning of this invasion."

"Invasion?" Bianca murmured, not knowing the word.

Pollenport explained and, as the albino drew rein, Bianca translated Pollenport's question into gestures.

The overseer answered her at such length that she had difficulty in putting his reply into English. As far as Pollenport could make out the message was that the Senior Hundred wanted him to go to the habitation immediately. Terrible things had been happening in his absence, the limping slave had blasphemed against their god and now was dead, and many of the overseers thought that all three remaining foreigners should be put to death.

"He say," Bianca translated, "if you no go, then overseers kill, not care whatever happen after."

"I see," said Pollenport. "Well, tell him that we've no objection to returning to the habitation. Tell him that his threats don't impress us, but that we are most anxious that no misunderstanding should exist between us, and the

Senior Hundred. And remind him that we are armed with magic and take rather a poor view of people who talk lightly about killing us."

The albino's reply to these remarks was interesting. "He say," Bianca translated, "that all right you go habitation, and he order the slaves get litters ready. He say, too, your magic no good now. He say his god destroy your magic now."

"What the hell does he mean?" Pollenport muttered, then suddenly remembered McQuoid's useless revolver, and understood. "Well, Bianca, tell him that he's talking poppycock."

The woman translated this remark, but it was clear that the overseer remained unconvinced. "No, he say your magic all gone," said Bianca.

"Is that so?" asked Pollenport and, as he spoke, he whipped out his revolver.

He fired towards the sky and, as the explosion shattered the desert's silence, he noticed several of the albinos draw back hastily, as if they were no longer so sure that they had the upper hand.

(vii)

VAN EYCK waited for the space-travellers, or news of them, in the neighbourhood of the *Skylark* and wished he were a hundred miles away. He had no stomach for violence, and ever since the death of McQuoid, he had been feeling weak and sick, but he knew it was his duty to stay near the habitation and to do whatever he could to help Pollenport and the others.

The darkness around him was alive with albinos, and while he waited still more came swarming out of the habitation. They crowded the river bank, jostling each other and gesticulating excitedly, and Van Eyck caught enough fragments of their conversation to get a general idea of what

"Where's Van Eyck?" Paul asked. "We'll be pretty helpless without him."

The moonlight, with nothing to offer except flat whites and dead blacks, confused the scene rather than illuminated it and, amidst the confusion, the space-travellers were unable to discover Van Eyck. By now all the area between the *Skylark* and the river was choked with overseers, some robed and some naked, and it was a hard task for the slaves carrying the litter to make headway through the crush.

"I guess they'll take us straight to the habitation," Paul remarked.

"It looks like it," Pollenport agreed. "I suppose we'll be hauled before the Senior Hundred for some sort of a trial."

"Think so?" Sam muttered, sceptically. "These chaps don't go in for trials and, even if they did, we wouldn't stand much chance of a favourable verdict."

The slaves bearing the litter followed the river-bank, until they came to the landing-stage, where they were permitted to set down their burden. The river itself was jammed almost solid with rafts and, as Pollenport stepped from the litter, another tremor shook the earth and brought down a shower of small rocks from the cliff top. One rock, as large as a man's fist, hit one of the liveried slaves and sent him sprawling into the river, but before Pollenport could see whether or not anyone troubled to rescue the man his view was obscured by a number of albinos thrusting their way between him and the river.

He heard Paul exclaim: "There's Van Eyck!" and turned to see the Antigiosian struggling through the throng toward them. Paul went forward to meet him and Pollenport was relieved to notice that the overseers backed away anxiously, as if they realised that the revolver Paul held was still as potent as ever.

"You got my message?" Van Eyck asked, as Pollenport grasped his hand.

"Yes. It was a nice piece of work, getting it to us."

"And the girl's all right?"

Pollenport assured him that she was being looked after by Bianca, and asked him how much he knew of the albinos' plans.

"Not much," Van Eyck told him. "They're in a state of panic and, although some of them think you ought to be killed right away, none of them dare brave your magic. They'll probably leave all decisions to the Senior Hundred."

"What about the blasting gear? Have they discovered it?"

"If they have they're keeping quiet about it," said Van Eyck. "No, I think you can take it that it's all right. It would be sacrilege for any albino to venture behind the idol, and the rest of the equipment is well hidden, isn't it? . . ."

A dozen overseers, gesticulating, shouting and flourishing their whips, had succeeded in marshalling the crowded, heaving rafts into some sort of order, and the rafts in front were already moving off in the direction of the tunnel. The raft nearest the landing-stage had been cleared of albinos, and now one of the overseers turned to Van Eyck and told him to ask the space-travellers to step on board it.

"He phrased the request in polite terms," Van Eyck told Pollenport. "That's to say, he did not speak of you as if you were already condemned."

Even so, the journey into the habitation was fairly terrifying. The four of them were alone on the raft except for the liveried slaves and a single overseer, but with rafts both ahead of them and behind them Pollenport could not keep his mind from dwelling on the possibility of an attack in the darkness. He knew that, in the event of a sudden concerted attack, he and his two companions wouldn't stand a chance. They'd be knocked from the raft, perhaps drowned

before they could fire more than a couple of random shots; and he supposed that the only reason why something of the sort wasn't attempted was that the overseers had no means of knowing how limited a weapon a revolver is. It did not occur to him at that time that they might also be fearful of provoking trouble from the slaves.

Nor was the journey through the tortuous shafts and passages towards the central cavern a very comforting experience. The tunnels were choked with albinos, and those in front hardly moved fast enough for those behind, so that several times the space-travellers found themselves jammed almost immovably amidst a mass of moist, evil-smelling bodies; and their uneasiness was not diminished by frequent earth tremors accompanied by rumblings, which tonight seemed peculiarly persistent and ominous.

At last they debouched into the cavern and, as the pressure eased up, were able to breathe freely once more. They kept with the albinos and moved warily over the cavern's rugge floor towards the idol.

It was even darker than usual in the great cavern that night. Events had disorganised the entire habitation, and almost all the liveried slaves had been pressed into service on the rafts. Most of the torches had burnt out, and the bonfire, instead of blazing, was now no more than a huge mound of ashes, quietly smouldering.

The place was swarming with overseers. All the space in front of the idol was jam-packed with them, and for a minute or so Van Eyck paid careful attention to their frantic gesticulations in an attempt to divine their mood and intentions.

"They're extremely confused," he murmured. "The members of the Senior Hundred have assembled, but nobody quite knows what's expected of them. You see, the overseers haven't the habit of thinking for themselves, and they haven't had much experience of emergency."

"Then let's seize the initiative," said Pollenport, surveying the confusion. "Come on."

He thrust his way through the fringes of the crowd, ready to use his revolver if any serious attempt was made to stop him, and the other three followed. The albinoes eyed them uneasily, but let them through and they reached the wall of the cavern without any great number of the overseers even noticing they had moved.

"Where the deuce is our gear?" Pollenport muttered.

"Well over to your left," Paul told him. "I can find it."

Then suddenly it seemed to dawn on the albinoes as a whole that something untoward was happening and the atmosphere became charged with tension as the great crowd beneath the idol swung round and faced the space-travellers. "Come on, run for it!" Paul shouted, and stumbling through the semi-darkness, he led the way to the curtain of rock that concealed the detonating plunger and the accumulators.

The recess was large enough to accommodate all four of them and, kneeling, Paul quickly connected the loose ends of the flex with the batteries' terminals. "Now what?" he murmured, straightening himself.

A strained, ominous silence filled the vast cavern and Pollenport peered cautiously round the edge of the rock. "I can't see much," he whispered, "but it's my impression that all the overseers are standing and staring in this direction. For the moment, they seem rather lost and bewildered, and, my God, there's a lot of them. Thousands, and they're still coming. . . ." Over to his right, and farther back still, he could just distinguish the main outlines of the idol and in the dim light it looked less like a chance collocation of rocks and more like a graven image than he had ever seen it.

He drew back into the recess and took Van Eyck's arm. "Feeling brave?" he asked. "Because I want you to step out there and tell the overseers that we've no particular quarrel

with them. Tell them that we were sent to this land to make a few adjustments in the laws, then try and persuade them that if they co-operate with us there need be no trouble."

"But it's sacrilege to talk of changing the law," said Van Eyck, nervously. "They've the right to kill even us be-hatted ones if we commit sacrilege."

"Then you won't do it?"

Van Eyck hesitated, and Pollenport noticed that he was trembling, but after about a minute he nodded, whispering: "Yes, I'll do it. . . ."

He stepped bravely out from the shelter of the rock and addressed the overseers. The nearest of them was at least thirty yards away, and Van Eyck had to make his gestures broad and emphatic to get his message across. At first his words were received in silence, then—no doubt when he came to the part about changing the law—a threatening murmur swept like a wind through the albinos' ranks, and he drew back hastily.

"They're going to attack!" he gasped, and, as he spoke, a missile crashed against the rock above their heads, and shattered.

It was followed by several more, and for some minutes the cavern echoed with the whistle of the steel whips as the missiles flew from their points. None hit the space-travellers and presently, when the albinos realised the futility of this method of attack, there came a lull.

Pollenport peered out round the edge of rock, and just then an albino kicked the bonfire into a blaze. Its light reflected redly on a hundred poised whips and then Pollenport saw that the overseers were spreading out into some kind of battle formation.

"A few dozen of them are going to attack us!" he said over his shoulder. "Get ready to fire."

Sam and Paul moved forward and, a moment later, the albinos let loose a blood-curdling howl and charged.

"Fire!" Pollenport shouted, and the roar of the revolver-shots rolled over and drowned the war-whoops in a thunder of noise that echoed and re-echoed from the cavern's walls and ceiling.

The line of albinos wavered. The space-travellers fired again, and this time one of the leading attackers was hit. He reeled forward like a drunken man, collided with a stalagmite, then fell to the ground, with blood pouring from a wound in his chest.

Again the space-travellers fired, and the attack petered out. The albinos turned and fled in disorder to rejoin the great mass of their fellows on the cavern's far side.

"I think that's shaken them a bit," said Pollenport. "And now, Van Eyck, tell them that if they attack us again, we'll overthrow their god. Tell them we've the power to do so, and that we're not to be provoked."

It was a measure of the overseers' demoralisation that they accepted this message in docile silence, but Pollenport had no illusions about the true position.

"It's a stalemate," he said. "If we blow up the idol, we kill a few score of the albinos—perhaps a hundred—and then we are at the mercy of the others. If we try to escape from here we shall be killed by missiles. But, on the other hand, they can't dislodge us."

"They can starve us into submission," said Paul.

"Yes. If they've got the patience."

Sam glanced down at the plunger and batteries. "What happens if they discover the flex?" he asked.

"They won't," said Pollenport. "It's pretty well hidden, and besides, even if they did find it, they wouldn't know what to make of it."

"Well, I don't see any solution," said Paul.

"Nor I," Pollenport murmured. "As I said before, it's a perfect stalemate. . . ."

THE little boy woke suddenly, as if from a bad dream, and pushed the blankets away from his face. He gazed anxiously round the small cave that was his home and, by the light of its single torch, saw that his half-brother, the hybrid, was struggling with the big flat rock that concealed the cave's entrance.

The child raised his hands and gestured.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

The hybrid glanced round. "Go to sleep," he said, in gestures. "I shan't be long."

"But I'm frightened," the little boy told him.

The freed slave left the rock and went and sat on the bed. "Why are you frightened?" he asked. "Have you had a bad dream?"

"I don't know," said the child, then, after a pause added: "Yes, I dreamt there was a noise, a big noise like thunder."

"But you're not frightened of thunder, are you?"

"No. It can't hurt me, can it?"

"No. Of course not."

The child was not more than half-awake. He made no objection when his brother drew the blankets round him and tucked him in, and within less than five minutes he was sound asleep once more.

The hybrid went back to the rock and shifted it from the entrance. He knew that the noise that had roused the child was not thunder, but he couldn't say what it was. It was louder and sharper than any earth tremor he had ever heard, and he was extremely puzzled.

He crept cautiously along the narrow cleft that took him out on to the ledge overlooking the great cavern and, once there, he lay flat on his stomach, staring down into the semi-darkness beneath.

The far end of the cavern was hidden from him by the

downward slope of the roof. He could not see the idol, but what he could make out of the general scene was enough to tell him that the overseers were not disporting themselves after their usual fashion. Great numbers of them were cowering back against the walls as if they were confronted by some unimaginable danger, and the hybrid, seeking the source of their terror, suddenly discovered that one albino had already been killed. He lay by a stalagmite with his legs crumpled under him and his chest a mass of congealing blood.

Presently, the hybrid's antennæ detected a slight movement from the deserted side of the cavern and he gazed in that direction. At first he could discern nothing, but after a few seconds another movement convinced him that he was not mistaken—without any doubt there was somebody there, and he decided that whoever it was must be hidden behind a broad curtain of rock that jutted out obliquely on that side.

The light in the cavern was increasing. Liveried slaves were bringing in more torches and others were throwing logs on the bonfire, and slowly the hybrid crept farther along the ledge in an attempt to see behind the curtain of rock.

Suddenly his efforts were rewarded. Light glinted on two tiny circles of glass, and the hybrid's heart gave a wild leap of excitement. Crystal-eyes was hiding behind the rock and with him were the other earth-men.

Almost at once the freed slave came to some sort of understanding of the position. He realised that the space-travellers were trapped in the cavern, but he also realised that they were not entirely powerless. He glanced again at the dead overseer and told himself that no doubt the earth-men were still in possession of their swift thunderous magic. It must have been the noise of that magic that he had heard while in the cave.

For some minutes he simply lay there, unable to decide what to do or whether he should do anything. He gazed down at the vast assembly of silent albinos held at bay by three beings from another world, and slowly there was born within him a consciousness of great events, which in turn forced him to a decision. And presently he crawled back along the ledge, filled with a sense of purpose and already persuaded that he, out of all the million or so hybrids in that land, had been singled out to perform an historic mission.

He returned to the little cave and carefully replaced the great rock over its entrance. For a few seconds he stood gazing at the sleeping child, then, his mind finally made up, he climbed on to the pile of blankets by the wall and rolled the stone away from the opening that led out on to the hillside.

The night was bright with moonlight and, when the hybrid emerged into the open air, he saw that one moon was now directly overhead, while the second was rising in the east. So far it was hardly above the horizon, but in another half-hour, with both moons in the sky and both nearly at the full, the night would be half as bright as day. The prospect enheartened the hybrid, and he told himself it augured well for his plans.

The night was warm and airless, and silence hung over the hills like a mist. Nothing moved on the hillside and, as soon as the hybrid was quite certain that the neighbourhood was deserted, he thrust aside the bushes that hid the opening and set out, running down the slope towards the grass-grown levels that separated the hills from the desert.

These levels were strewn with boulders and flanked by great buttes of rotten rock, which, farther on, merged together to form the western wall of the cliff-city, and the hybrid moved through this desolate area like a shadow, following a route with which he was not familiar because normally he avoided it. In fact, he was just about to tell

himself he was lost, when he came upon a broad, regular path, worn smooth by thousands of feet treading it each day.

The path led towards the high cliffs, and sloped downwards into a rounded tunnel that might have been the burrow of a mammoth rabbit, although actually it was the entrance to a cave housing thousands of haulage slaves. A few feeble torches burned in the darkness ahead and for a moment the hybrid was almost choked by the stench of filthy sweating bodies.

Suddenly, from the darkness, someone gesticulated, challenging him, and then he saw that his way into the cave was barred by about a dozen foremen. Four or five of them were still awake, reclining on a bed of fresh hay just inside the cave's entrance.

The hybrid had expected something of the sort. He was not particularly disconcerted, and he replied to the challenger's "Who's that?" in emphatic, authoritative gestures.

"I'm the personal servant of an overlord in the east," he said. "There's been a great landslide in our district, burying my lord's habitation and all his possessions. More than half his slaves have been killed, and he has been authorised by the Senior Hundred to call on the haulage men for rescue work. How many slaves can you muster?"

The foremen exchanged uneasy glances, and then one of them said, fumbling his gestures a little: "Well, we've a couple of thousand here, but——"

"Good," said the hybrid. "Let's have a look at them."

He strode forward into the cave before the foremen had a chance to stop him, and grabbed a torch from the wall as he went.

Most of the slaves were awake. Some, working late in the cliff-city, had heard accounts of McQuoid's death from the liveried slaves, and for the last three hours the cave had

been alive with rumour and speculation. And now there came striding into their midst this strange apparition who might have been one of themselves, yet who wore no clamp and was dressed in colourful garments much like those worn by the women.

Within a minute all was movement as several of the hybrids kicked aside the foul hay in which they were lying and leapt to their feet. On all sides claw-like hands framed the word: "Liberation . . ." some putting it as a diffident question and others as a triumphant statement, and there were some slaves who put their hands to their clamps as if they expected them to be magically unlocked.

One of the creatures, realising that the newcomer was about to address them, took the torch from him to leave his hands free, and held it high so that all the wretches, as they came crowding round from the deepest recesses of that nauseous cavern, could get a sight of him.

The hybrid raised his hands. "I come to you from Crystal-eyes!" he said. "Your liberation is in the balance. Everything that Crystal-eyes has worked for is in danger, and he is at this moment in the great habitation locked in battle with your oppressors. He needs your help——"

A burst of enthusiastic gesticulation interrupted the speech at this point, and several precious minutes passed before the hybrid was able to continue. Some of the slaves, who realised the need for order, struggled to control their wilder neighbours, with the result that quarrels broke out, and the hybrid began to despair of ever making anything of this adventure.

"Don't fight amongst yourselves," he implored, repeating the gesture several times, and then, as some semblance of order began to emerge, went on: "Grab the foremen! Don't let them get away! Don't let them betray us . . ."

So far the foremen had been too bewildered and terrified to make any attempt to escape, and now they allowed

themselves to be taken without a struggle, and the hybrid hurriedly outlined a plan of campaign.

"The great majority of you," he said, "will march directly into the cliff-city and lay siege to the habitation. I will lead you and you must arm yourselves with whatever you can find in the way of weapons. The nearer slave settlements must be visited and roused, and for that purpose I want volunteers to organise themselves into groups of six. Each group will go to one of the settlements, overpower the foremen and lead the slaves to the cliff-city—you are all haulage slaves and know the way to the habitation. And from each settlement I want the volunteers to send out messengers to the further settlements, until every slave in the land is marching against our oppressors. . . ."

More than a hundred slaves volunteered for this work and, as quickly as he could, the hybrid selected the most likely-looking and organised them into groups. Then he sent them out into the night to rally the great numbers of slaves who were employed in the water meadows east of the marshes, as well as those at the river bend and those that lived in the fishing settlements along the seashore.

Outside the cave, the slaves were smashing up the haulage sleds in their quest for weapons, and by the time the freed slave arrived on the scene a free-for-all was raging, with the creatures fighting amongst themselves for the handiest forms of timber.

This time Pollenport's self-appointed messenger had considerable difficulty in restoring order, but he managed it at last, by railing, cursing and invoking Crystal-eyes' name, and then he put himself at the head of the rabble and ordered it to follow him.

Actually, he was feeling far from confident of success and, as he led the horde over the boulder-strewn desert at the foot of the cliffs, he asked himself almost hopelessly how he could inspire his followers with some sense of unity and

purpose. No doubt they wanted their freedom, but they wanted it heaven-sent, and had never suspected that they might have to fight for it. Their fear for their own skins was undermining their revolutionary ardour, and the uncertainty of their resolution was discernible in their present progress, which oscillated between being a surge and a straggle.

Then there came riding across the desert a solitary overseer, heading for the cliff-city, and the hybrid at once realised that he was about to be faced with the testing-point. The rabble behind him wavered, then stopped, all eyes gazing fearfully at the rider racing towards them like a ghost through the moonlight, and for a terrible minute the hybrid expected the wretches to break and run. He gestured: "Follow me!" and hurled himself towards the mounted man without even daring to wonder whether the slaves would obey him.

The overseer roared at him, drawing rein. His steed reared and, as the hybrid clutched at the bridle, he felt the animal's breath in his face and heard the overseer's whip whistle through the air, yet never felt the pain of the blow in his triumph at finding all the slaves around him, brandishing their primitive weapons and dragging at the albino's robes.

The fury of the slaves' hatred startled even the hybrid, and, as the overseer fell screaming from his mount, the frenzied mob caught him, and then threw him into the air again and again, striking at him all the while until the fellow's head and limbs were pulp, and all his garments sodden with blood.

The hybrid had no stomach for this kind of work, and instead busied himself with the albino's mount. He caught it and managed to calm it, and by the time he was on its back, the overseer was dead and the slaves had taken possession of his key. One by one the loathed clamps came off as the key was passed from hand to hand, and as each slave removed his

clamp he hurled it with all his strength at the near-by boulders, striking sparks from the impact and making the night reverberate with the crash of metal against stone.

After that there was no holding the slaves. They raced howling through the darkness like maniacs, and, even mounted, the hybrid had difficulty in keeping at their head. Shrieking and yelling, they went raging through the ravines and gullies of the cliff-city, and all chance of marshalling them into a formidable, disciplined force vanished like smoke.

By the time the hybrid reached the entrance to the habitation he was in despair. Some of the slaves were already in the river, grappling with the liveried men on the two or three rafts moored by the landing-stage, and the hybrid's gestures became frantic: "Wait!" he implored. "Wait until there are more of us . . ." but it was useless. More and more slaves plunged into the river and headed for the tunnel that led into the heart of the habitation and, if those in front wavered, faced by darkness and the unknown, they still had no choice but to advance, pushed forward by the pressure of the screaming mob at their backs. . . .

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THE overseers in the great cavern had food brought to them and ate it standing up, cramming it into their mouths in handfuls, and all the while they gazed at the rock that hid the earth-men.

A little later, Paul, who was keeping cautious watch round the edge of the rock, noticed that liveried slaves were carrying quantities of faggots into the cavern. The overseers urged the slaves forward with their whips and presently it became clear that the faggots were being used to build a semi-circular barricade enclosing the

curtain of rock and not more than twenty yards away.

Paul called Pollenport's attention to this. "I suppose they're planning to smoke us out," he said. "Shall I fire my revolver to scare the slaves back?"

"No," said Pollenport. "It won't do any good. The ~~albinos~~ will simply force them to go on with the work and, even if ~~we~~ start shooting the slaves, we shan't achieve anything. There's a limitless supply."

As the barricade slowly rose, the overseers recovered their confidence and started shouting and gesticulating again. "They're hurling insults at us," said Van Eyck. "They say that we'll all be burnt into cinders."

"Then tell them," said Pollenport, "that if they set light to those faggots we'll certainly destroy their god, come what may."

Nervously, Van Eyck leant out from behind the wall and gestured, but the overseers were now too exultant and sure of themselves to pay any attention. They yelled and shrieked at Van Eyck, and when a missile crashed against the rock within a foot of his big hat he drew back hastily.

The building of the wall of faggots went on inexorably and, when it was about breast high, the slaves draped it with several pieces of sacking soaked in oil. Then a slave plucked a torch from its wall-socket and came running towards the faggots with the blazing torch in his hand.

"This is it," said Pollenport, grasping the handle of the detonating plunger. "Get ready to run for it."

"What are you going to do?" asked Sam.

"Blow the idol up, of course," Pollenport told him. "After the explosion, count ten and then make a dash for the exit. There's just a chance that, in all the confusion, we may get away."

"But," said Van Eyck, "if you blow up the idol, the giver of the law will be killed."

There was a moment's uneasy silence, and then Paul murmured: "They've lighted the faggots."

Pollenport peered over Paul's shoulder and saw that both ends of the untidy barricade were on fire, and already clouds of yellow smoke were pouring out from under the scraps of sacking. A slave was firing the wall in yet another place, and now the overseers were calm and steady, gazing toward the faggots in a kind of silent ecstasy. Pollenport glanced towards the idol and at the behatted man, relentlessly gesticulating between the idol's knees.

"Yes, he'll be killed," he told Van Eyck. "What do you wish me to do?"

Van Eyck hesitated, and when the pause had lasted nearly a minute it was broken by an exclamation from Paul. "Jonah, come here!" he cried. "I think something's up."

Pollenport joined him, and Paul pointed through the smoke towards a liveried slave who was standing with his eyes covered in front of one of the Senior Hundred while he gestured agitatedly with his free hand. "He came running into the cavern as if a devil was after him," said Paul, and Pollenport noticed that the fellow's clothes were torn, soiled and wet.

"It looks as if he waded here through the river tunnel," he said. "Van Eyck, see if you can make out what this chap's saying."

However, the slave was too far away for that, and it wasn't until the member of the Senior Hundred turned and addressed the other albinos that Van Eyck learned anything of what was afoot.

Then he glanced at Pollenport with his eyes shining. "It's the slaves!" he exclaimed. "They've revolted. They're storming the habitation and—and——" The smoke ~~was~~ getting into his nose and mouth and he broke off, coughing.

Paul buried the lower part of his face in the crook of his arm and gazed through the smoke with smarting eyes.

Terror had seized the albinos, and now they were pouring down the length of the cavern towards the exit, pushing and jostling each other in their anxiety to repel the invasion. The space-travellers were forgotten and, as Pollenport surveyed the jostling mass of white naked bodies, he realised that this was their chance.

He drew a deep breath, then ran towards the blazing faggots, kicking at them and scattering them. Sam and Paul joined him, and within a few minutes there was nothing left of the barricade except a litter of smouldering sticks and sacking.

Gasping and spluttering, Pollenport returned to the shelter of the rock. He clutched Van Eyck's arm and, almost too breathless to speak, pointed towards the idol. "Tell—your pal—to come down," he panted.

"You're going to blow up the idol?" Van Eyck asked, and now that the climax of Pollenport's project was at hand, the Antigeosian seemed nervous and fearful, as if even he were not entirely without reverence for those few massive lumps of insensate rock.

"Yes," said Pollenport. "Tell him to get well away and to hide himself in a recess until it's over."

By now the cavern was almost deserted. The liveried slaves had all withdrawn towards the habitation's kitchens and every overseer able to wield a whip had hurried away to suppress the revolt. No one was left, except a handful of albinos too senile and feeble to know exactly what was happening, and when these abject creatures, huddling together round the great fire, caught the gist of Van Eyck's message and saw the giver of the law descend from the idol, they were seized with panic. They rose shakily to their feet and scattered, stumbling through the dim light towards the darkest parts of the cavern, where they cowered behind stalagmites and under rocks, moaning and trembling.

Van Eyck and the three space-travellers hid themselves behind the curtain of rock, and once more Pollenport grasped the handle of the plunger. "Hold tight," he muttered, "here it comes."

He rammed the plunger home. For an instant there was absolute silence, and during that instant the space-travellers had time to feel disappointed, suspecting a fiasco and telling themselves that the wiring must have been faulty. Then they heard a brief muffled explosion, but it was so unremarkable that it did little to alleviate their feelings of disappointment, particularly when it wasn't followed by the rumble of falling rock.

"Too little explosive," Sam muttered. "What do we do now?"

"Stay where you are," said Pollenport.

He peered round the edge of the rock, and his spirits suddenly lifted as he discovered that his plan was by no means ending in fiasco. The idol was falling, but it was doing so in slow motion, subsiding like a man leaning against a wall whose legs are slowly drawn away. The rocks forming the idol's knees ponderously heeled over sideways, raising clouds of dust, and, as the immense slab of rock that had been the idol's trunk slid down, Pollenport was astounded to see the smaller rock that balanced upon it—the idol's head—fall into the darkness away from the cavern, as if behind the idol there was an enormous pit or cavity. He caught a glimpse of small boulders and stones showering down into this cavity, and then thin clouds of white smoke started to issue from it.

"The volcano!" he muttered. "My God, Paul, we've blown a hole into the volcano's shaft."

All of them moved out into the cavern and stared at the jagged gaping hole, through which wisps of smoke were still drifting.

"Well, it can't start anything, can it?" Sam murmured. "I

mean, volcanoes aren't as unstable as all that, are they?"

"No, of course not," said Pollenport. "It's interesting, that's all."

Through the veil of smoke, they could still see loose stones and rocks pouring into the shaft, and Pollenport remarked that the destruction of the idol seemed to have unsettled the local rock formations fairly thoroughly. "

Then a sizeable rock hurtled down, followed by two or three more, and Paul glanced at Pollenport uneasily. "What the hell's happening now?" he asked. "Those rocks didn't just fall, they shot out there as if something were shoving them. It looks to me as if the whole of the right-hand side of the shaft is caving in."

"Yes," said Sam. "Let's get——"

A sudden loud roar drowned the end of his sentence, and through the smoke they caught a glimpse of something that shone dimly in the feeble light, and the noise of the roar increased in volume until it became a deafening rumble, with hissing, spluttering overtones.

"Water!" exclaimed Pollenport. "Anything can happen now. Come on!"

Paul glanced over his shoulder as he ran and, now that the water had drowned the smoke, he had a clear and terrifying view of an immense cataract cascading down the volcano's shaft. "An underground lake," he muttered. "Must have been . . ." and then he nearly collided with the late giver of the law, who was wandering around amidst the stalagmites like a bewildered sheep.

"Van Eyck," he shouted, "tell your pal to keep with us. . . ."

Pollenport and Sam were plodding along behind him, and the two Antigiosians brought up the rear, but before any of them reached the cavern's exit there came a strange rustling noise like a high wind among trees and, with another glance over his shoulder, Paul saw a great jet

of steam shoot across the semi-darkness behind them and hit the rock they had just left.

"Thank God we missed that lot!" he shouted, as Pollenport and Sam came up, and the words had hardly left his lips when the cavern was shaken by an appalling explosion, as if two irresistible forces had collided head-on somewhere in the ground immediately beneath. Paul was thrown to the ground and lay there with his head buried in his arms, conscious that fragments of rock were flying about the cavern like shrapnel. He heard stalactites come crashing down from the roof and felt the floor tremble and heave beneath him as if it were about to melt and engulf him. Scalding blasts of steam swept the cavern's far end, extinguishing the torches and, from the darkness, he heard Pollenport shout: "Make for the tunnel, everyone! We'll be safer there. . . ."

Sam was the only one of them who had a torch and now its beam struck feebly into the steamy darkness. "This way," he yelled. "Come on. . . ."

Paul staggered to his feet and followed the wavering shaft of light. He bumped against Van Eyck and took the Antigiosian's arm. "Where's your pal?" he asked, but Van Eyck did not reply until they were in the tunnel, when Paul repeated the question.

"Dead," said Van Eyck. "His head was crushed by a rock . . ." and, by the light of the torch, Paul could see that the man's face was almost green with shock and terror. .

"Grab his other arm," he muttered to Pollenport. "I think he's going to faint."

However, Van Eyck protested that he was all right and, with another earth tremor shaking the habitation and clouds of steam rolling past them along the tunnel, they started on towards the river.

They had not gone far before Sam, who was leading, suddenly stopped. "Listen!" he exclaimed, and then they

heard, above the steady rumbling of the earthquake, a sound that made their blood run cold, a horrifying sound as if the darkness ahead of them were haunted by lost souls in torment, moaning and screaming.

Sam moved forward cautiously, and presently came to a junction where four or five tunnels met. From one of these tunnels panic-stricken women and livery slaves were pouring and, as they vanished into the darkness ahead, the space-travellers followed them, and found that, a quarter of a mile farther on, the tunnel was choked solid with the terrified creatures. Sam shone his torch on their backs, and it was clear that they were making no forward progress at all. They were fighting ferociously among themselves, and those behind were struggling to climb over the heads of those in front.

"Looks pretty hopeless," said Pollenport. "I suppose the overseers and the slaves are still fighting it out in the river and no-one can escape. Paul, you'll have to find the cave where the freed slave and the child live, and we'll get out that way."

Paul remarked that he felt no more competent to find the cave than anyone else, and when they had spent some fifteen minutes blundering about in the darkness, trying first this tunnel and then that, it became clear that his pessimism was justified. The steam was now so dense that Sam's torch was all but useless and the heat was appalling.

Eventually, Pollenport called a halt. "This is no use," he said, wiping the sweat from his face. "Let's have a rest and then see if we can be a bit more systematic in our search. Van Eyck, have you any idea where we are in relation to the great cavern?"

"None," said Van Eyck. "Except that we must now be considerably above the level of its floor."

"Yes," said Sam. "That's my impression, too. We've certainly been climbing upward rather than downward."

He had switched the torch out to save the battery, and now someone or something brushed against him in the darkness. His hand shot out and clutched a bare arm. He heard a startled scream, and had to exert himself to prevent his prisoner escaping. With his free hand, he managed to switch on the torch and, by its light, discovered that his captive was a woman.

"Good God!" Paul exclaimed. "It's the child's mother. Let her go, Sam, and we'll follow her."

The woman was clearly terrified and, as soon as Sam released her, she raced off into the misty darkness as if pursued by fiends. The space-travellers followed as best they could, but she knew every inch of the tunnel, and it wasn't long before they had lost her again.

Sam and Paul were well in front and they paused to let the other two catch up. "At least we must be somewhere near the cavern——" Paul began, then, struck by a difference in the tunnel's resonance, suddenly stopped.

"My God, we're in it!" he exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" asked Sam, and the torch, as he swung its beam about, revealed nothing but an impenetrable fog of white steam.

"We're in the cavern," said Paul. "Give me the torch, and for God's sake don't move. A yard or so in front of you there's a sixty-foot drop."

He heard Pollenport and Van Eyck approaching, and shouted to them to stay where they were. "You're on a ledge above the cavern," he told them, "but keep close to the wall on your right and you'll be safe."

He cautiously squeezed his way past Sam and shone the torch along the wall until he found the cleft that led to the cave. He directed the torch's beam back along the ledge and called to the others to join him, but before they could do so the cavern was rocked by another terrific earth tremor.

Paul crouched against the wall, listening to the rocks

crashing to the floor below, and at every moment he expected the ledge he was standing on to collapse and carry him and his companions to their deaths.

However, the tremor subsided into an uneasy, long-drawn-out rumbling, and the other three managed to negotiate the ledge as far as the cleft.

Paul started to squeeze his way along the crevice, then suddenly experienced the sensation of cool air blowing into his face. "Hell, fresh air!" he exclaimed, gleefully. "Come on. . . ."

The flat rock had been moved away from the cave's entrance. There was no sign of the woman or of her sons, and moonlight was streaming into the cave through the small opening above the pile of blankets.

"Hey, Paul," cried Sam. "Give us a hand with Jonah. He's stuck in the crevice."

"Oh, my God," muttered Paul. "If this doesn't teach him he's too fat for space-travelling, nothing will."

Between them, and with Van Eyck pushing from behind, they managed to drag Pollenport into the cave.

One by one they clambered up to the opening and crawled out on to the hillside. They threw themselves to the turf, drew deep breaths of air and gazed at the volcano's crater with its great fountain of steam roaring up hundreds of feet into the air. They could feel the vapour falling on their faces like fine rain and, beyond the volcano, the arc of a lunar rainbow trembled in the sky and spanned the further hills.

"I should have suspected it," Pollenport remarked.

"What?" asked Paul.

"Why, an underground lake," Pollenport told him. "Obviously, on this side of the watershed the hills drain off into the marshes, but why didn't I ask myself what happened on the other side? Dash it all, I didn't even ask myself where the river that flows through the habitation had its source."

"Anyway," said Sam, "now we know what happens when you pour Lake Como into Vesuvius."

Pollenport started to climb the hill. "Let's see what's going on in the city," he said.

Afterwards, on thinking the experience over, it struck Paul as strange that they had not troubled about getting away from the place as quickly as they could, but he came to the conclusion that their coolness was accounted for by the relativity of things—they felt so much safer on the hillside than they had felt in the habitation that it did not occur to them that they were still in danger, in spite of the almost continuous earth tremors, and the steady roaring of the volcano. Anyway, they all followed Pollenport to the summit of the hill and gazed down upon the cliff-city, part of which they could see like a map stretched out in the moonlight before them.

A ferocious battle was raging in the city, but at first and at that distance, the men on the hill could distinguish no more detail than the white bodies of the overseers and the darker bodies of the slaves. The overseers had cleared the slaves out of the river and were massed along its bank, and the thick of the battle appeared to be in the neighbourhood of the *Skylark*, where white bodies and dark were desperately intermingled, so that the spaceship seemed to float like a vast bubble on a raging sea.

"My God, look along the defiles!" exclaimed Pollenport. "Slaves! Thousands upon thousands of them! And how the devil did they come to revolt on tonight of all nights?"

"Maybe some kind of bush telegraph," Paul murmured, and the real cause of the revolt was to remain a mystery to the space-travellers for ever. Its instigator, the freed slave, had been killed early in the fighting and now his corpse was among the many floating in the river.

The slaves were fighting like maniacs, smashing at the overseers' skulls with logs of wood and lumps of rock, and

Paul glimpsed one horrifying incident wherein nine or ten hybrids tore an albino's head from his shoulders by main force. "Holy smoke!" he muttered. "Who would've believed that the slaves had so much fight in them?"

"They've got to fight," said Pollenport. "They've no alternative. They can't get away—the pressure behind them is too great."

"If you ask me," said Sam, "the overseers don't stand a chance."

"No," agreed Pollenport. "In fact, if a single one survives it will be a miracle. And look—the slaves are lining the cliff tops."

He was right. Hybrids, unable to get into the overcrowded city, were swarming over the cliffs like ants, hurling great rocks and boulders on to the struggling mass of overseers beneath, and preventing any albinos escaping up the hewn stairways.

A sudden deep rumble, different in quality from all that had preceded it and peculiarly ominous, made the space-travellers glance towards the volcano, and they were astonished to see the great column of steam waver and then dwindle, subsiding like the jet of a fountain when the water is turned off.

"The lake must be empty," said Paul.

"Hardly," said Pollenport. "No, I think something must be choking the shaft——" and, as the logical conclusion of his hypothesis burst upon him, he broke off and waved a hand towards the desert.

"For God's sake, get away!" he shouted, and Paul heard him mutter something about enormous pressures building up. Then, as they all moved from the hill top, he added: "God, if I'm right there'll be an explosion like the crack of doom!"

They ran. They hurled themselves down the hill so fast that it was as much as their feet could do to keep up with

their bodies. Paul reached the level ground first, wheeled to the right and headed for the desert.

Sam, not far behind Pollenport, got a stitch in his side and paused to raise his knee to his chin.

Van Eyck came panting up behind him, stumbling over the broken ground as if every step would be his last. "I must rest," he gasped. "I'm too old. Can't run any more."

"Yes, you can," said Sam, putting an arm round him and heaving him forward. "Now, come on—don't let old Jonah shame us. . . ."

When Paul was a mile out into the desert he slowed down and glanced back over his shoulder. The night was as still as a painting, and the volcano, with its cone silhouetted darkly against the moonlit sky, looked so innocent that he found himself thinking that Pollenport had been over-hasty in his conjecture. "And what the hell?" he muttered. "If it's going to be like Krakatoa, it won't make any odds whether I'm a mile away, two miles or twenty."

His pace became a jog-trot, and when he heard Pollenport pounding along behind him he stopped altogether and waited for his chief to catch up.

"Keep—running, Paul," gasped Pollenport. "One of us—may as well—survive!"

Paul was gazing towards the volcano, and hardly heard him, because at that moment everything started to happen. "Look!" he shouted and, as he spoke, all the top part of the volcano blew off and rose majestically into the air—a dark ring of rock followed by a great blast of crimson fire that shot fantastically upwards through the flying crater like smoke through a smoke ring.

A blast-wave, roaring outwards across the desert, manifested itself as a high curving wall of dust and smoke, and the two space-travellers hurled themselves to the ground a second before it struck them. It dragged them along with it for yards, spinning them round like dead leaves, and Paul

etched up against a boulder with all the breath knocked from his body. In the midst of swirling sand, he saw Sam and Van Eyck roll past him, clasped in each other's arms, and in the next second, as the sound of the explosion reached him, all about him seemed to convert itself into a crash so tremendous that he felt as if he were caught in the centre of the most appalling thunderclap he had ever heard.

The noise passed and after it anything would have seemed a lull. A lurid orange light was spreading over the desert as if the whole sky was in flames, and Paul, deaf and dizzy, dragged himself to his feet. A steady wind fanned his face as the air, forced away by the blast-wave, was now sucked back by the torrents of heat that the volcano was hurling up into the sky. The wind grew stronger and swept clouds of sand along with it, so that Paul, as he staggered forward, had to battle his way through a sand-storm with his eyes almost closed and his hands over his nose and mouth.

He found his companions a quarter of a mile ahead, lying in a dried water-course into which the blast-wave had blown them. Pollenport had lost his tunic, his back and both arms were bleeding profusely and, as Paul crawled into the gully, he realised his chief was speaking to him, although he could hear nothing.

"Shout," he said. "I'm deaf."

Faintly, he heard Pollenport say: "We're all deaf and I am shouting. In fact, we're in rotten shape. Sam's broken a wrist and Van Eyck's lost the use of his antennæ. He can't feel anything with them."

They rested a while, and then Pollenport and Paul climbed up to the gully's lip and looked about them. Flames and smoke were still pouring from the volcano, and lava, incandescently bright, and as liquid as water, was streaming down its sides, flowing towards the cliff city in torrents that hardened and darkened, but which were endlessly renewed by fresh lava cascading down over the old; and all the sky

in that direction was veiled by a cloud of ashes and dust through which the moons showed palely, as if seen through smoked glass.

Pollenport pointed to the east, where the horizon was smudged by dim clouds of dust rising slowly into the air. "They're streaming out of the cliff city," he said. "The slaves, the women, the children and whatever's left of the overseers. . . ."

(x)

OVERNIGHT the rule of the albinos perished and a week passed before the volcano showed any signs of abating. By then the cliff-city was virtually nonexistent, buried beneath lava and ashes.

Each day, a sombre sun burned in a sky that was dark with smoke and dust, and each night the southern horizon glared red above the torrents of molten rock. All the while a hot relentless wind blew over the land, sucked towards the point of eruption by the heat, and, in the face of this wind, the scattered bands of women and children, short of food and drink, straggled slowly across the desert, some heading north, towards the sea, others east, towards the valleys.

During all that terrible time the hybrids were the masters. Day and night they roamed the desert, hunting and killing the albinos, bent upon destroying the breed for ever, and, even if some of the erstwhile overseers escaped into the hills or marshes, it soon became known that their race was doomed by another circumstance—none of the albino women had survived the cataclysm.

Pollenport learned this startling news on the third day of the eruption and was incredulous. "You must be mistaken," he told Van Eyck. "Some are sure to have escaped. The lava can't have reached the cliff-city's

main defiles until hours after the first explosion."

"None escaped," said Van Eyck, dogmatically. "I have questioned more than a dozen of our women, and they all tell me the same thing."

"Then what happened?"

Van Eyck explained that the law governing the behaviour of the albino women was just as uncompromising as all the rest of the laws, and the Scourge had quite definitely laid it down that no woman was to leave the zenana without the express authority of a member of the Senior Hundred—and this applied even in the event of fire, flood, earthquake or volcanic eruption. For upwards of seventy generations the albino women had been conditioned by that law, so perhaps, after all, it was not surprising that matters turned out as they did. "Our women implored the albino women to flee with them into the desert," said Van Eyck, "but it was no use. In fact, it was difficult to make them understand what was happening. 'We'll stay here until it's all over,' they said, and asked for a member of the Senior Hundred to be brought to them. But that, of course, in view of the fighting and the slaves crowding the defiles, was out of the question, and so the women perished."

"Good God," murmured Pollenport. "Amazing."

"Amazing to you and me," said Van Eyck, "who know what a volcanic eruption means—but what could the women know of that? For them the volcano was simply something they had seen in childhood as a mountain with smoke at the top and something into which they, the married ones, would one day have to immolate themselves if they became widows, but what could they know of the fire and the heat and the molten rock? All around them, among their servants as well as among the overseers, there was a conspiracy of silence regarding the real nature of a volcano. . . ."

The havoc caused by the disaster was inestimable. Acres of arable land lying between the desert and the marshes were

submerged beneath volcanic ash. Flocks of the wallaby-like animals, left untended by the insurgent hybrids, scattered in terror and were irretrievably lost. The cliff-city's workshops, filled with tools and raw materials and representing virtually the whole of the industry of the region, were buried and destroyed. Hundreds of transport sleds were burned, and all the white riding animals that were stabled in the cliff-city—nearly three-quarters of the total number—were trapped by the flood of lava, and perished miserably. Valuable pine-forests covering the southern slopes of the hills were destroyed by fire, and even the sea itself was polluted by poisoned water flowing into it from the river whose source was in the underground lake.

Everywhere along the river there was evidence of a vast tidal wave of scalding water that had raced towards the sea following the initial explosion. Parboiled corpses and stranded rafts littered both banks for miles and, in the neighbourhood of the balloon site, the hybrids' dug-outs had been swamped and all the surrounding vegetation smashed.

Yet the balloon itself, a quarter of a mile from the river, had survived intact except for some comparatively minor damage to its rigging. . . .

(xi)

NEITHER the space-travellers nor Van Eyck were so badly injured as they had at first imagined themselves to be. Their deafness was only temporary, and Sam's wrist proved to be not broken but sprained. As for Van Eyck's antennæ, the left one healed rapidly, but the other continued to give him trouble for weeks. It ached occasionally, particularly when he was tired, and at other times he complained of feeling as if a swarm of gnats was constantly darting in the air about a yard in front of him.

No sooner did it become generally known that Pollenport had returned to the river-land than the balloon site was established as a place of pilgrimage for the hybrids. They swarmed around in their thousands, hampering Sam and Paul in the work of repairing the balloon and irritating Pollenport by their unreasoning adulation. The desert grew black with them, and day by day their numbers increased as newcomers poured in from the distant provinces, hoping to catch at least a glimpse of their deliverer.

"If this goes on," Pollenport told Van Eyck, fretfully, "we shall soon have disease and famine adding themselves to the other miseries. And, anyway, what do they expect me to *do*?"

"Nothing," said Van Eyck. "They're happy just to gaze at you. But if you did address them, they'd be ecstatic."

"Well, in a day or so I'm going to tell them to get back to work. How will they take that, do you think?"

"They will obey you," Van Eyck assured him. "If they disobeyed, they'd fear you might call a new breed of overseers into being."

"Poor wretches," muttered Pollenport, and in the weeks that followed he used his authority to re-establish the community as a going concern. He decreed that both hybrids and women must work in the valleys and in the fisheries until food supplies were assured, and then turned his thoughts to the more distant future.

He gathered around him all the brown-skinned men and, desolate as the land was, presently succeeded in inspiring them with faith in the future of their people. There were some, elders for the most part, who came to him resentfully, despondent in the conviction that society could not continue to exist if there were to be no more hybrids, and feeling that the price paid for deliverance from the overseers was too high, but Pollenport, with Van Eyck interpreting for him, managed to dissuade them from their views. He pointed out

that the hybrids would not be extinct for at least fifty years, and by then there would be enough mature men of the brown-skinned race to carry on the work of building a new world. "They will inherit all the territory formerly ruled by the albinos," he said, "and they will be their own masters. As long as you see to it that the foundations are well laid, I'm confident that those that come after you will create civilisation far richer and happier than any this continent has known. . . ."

In any case, among the women there was nothing of despair or faint-heartedness. While Sam and Paul busied themselves in dismantling the balloon in readiness for the long trek northwards and while the rafts were being assembled for the journey, Pollenport, in company with Van Eyck, made several visits to the surrounding valley encampments and wherever he went he found a spirit of renaissance in the air. Side by side with the hybrids the women cheerfully toiled to bring the valleys back into cultivation, to reorganise the fisheries and to establish new workshops in what had once been the overseers' habitations.

Finally, exactly fifteen weeks after the eruption, the flotilla of rafts set off towards the north—seven huge rafts towed by no fewer than fifteen hundred hybrids, who, because every freed slave in the land hoped for the honour of accompanying Pollenport on this journey, had been selected by lot. . . .

(xii)

ON the ground the darkness was only relieved by the faintest traces of light, but as the balloon ascended towards the ink-blue sky it soon brought the sun above the tilting horizon, and at two thousand feet Pollenport could see the faces of his companions clearly, and every

detail of the gondola's interior. Paul was emptying sand bags over the side one after another, and Sam's attention was divided between the compass in his hand and as much as he could distinguish of the dark coastline beneath.

More than three months had passed since they set out for the peninsula. Nearly ten weeks had been taken up by the long uneventful journey along the coast, and another month with testing the balloon and studying the peninsula's winds and weather. Now at last the balloon was aloft, with a steady wind blowing from the south.

Sam pointed downwards with a triumphant grin as the balloon crossed the coastline, and gradually the darkness lifted from the sea. The sun struck a broad path of light across the green water, making the surface sparkle as if it were strewn with brilliants, and as the balloon revolved the whole scene swung slowly round and round on an axis immediately beneath.

No one spoke for a long time. The incredible unearthly silence seemed to inhibit them from using their voices and also they were preoccupied by the significance of the journey. They gazed steadily at the horizon ahead and watched it darken as the coastline of the northern continent rose slowly from the sea.

The hours passed, and the sun became a disc of pitiless fire, glaring from a hot ochreous sky, and still no one spoke until they could see the breakers as a line of brilliantly white surf about two miles in front. Then Sam muttered: "We're coming to the tricky bit," and reached for the release cord of the valve. It was his intention to come down in the sea as near the shore as possible. He knew the peninsula well, and he knew that north of the coast there was nothing except parched mountainous country for hundreds of miles. . . .

The balloon descended steadily until they seemed to be practically scudding over the waves. Beyond the breakers they could see a strip of sandy beach and a line of low cliffs,

and nearly a mile to the west they could discover an opening in the cliffs which they fervently hoped was the entrance to a habitation. They knew that along this coast there were several small habitations, which were used by the Antiposians as holiday resorts.

They could hear the roar of the breakers now, and Sam opened the valve to its full extent. "Hold tight," he muttered. "Any moment now," and he had hardly spoken when the crest of a roller caught the gondola and spilled them into the sea.

Paul was laughing like a schoolboy as he swam, kicking and splashing, towards the beach. He waved to the balloon as it rolled clumsily past him, half-deflated, and looking as undignified as a drunken elephant, and couldn't stop laughing.

"What the deuce is the matter with you?" asked Sam, swimming, as they stumbled through the surf.

"Nothing," said Paul. "We've made it, that's all."

They dropped to the beach, let the sun dry their clothes, and luxuriated in their sensations of relief. After their experiences of the last eighteen months, whatever lay ahead seemed easy. Soon they would get up and find their way to the nearest habitation. Within a matter of days they would be reunited with Rose and Timothy. Sam was already dreaming of a new and better *Skylark*, and all three were confident that one day they'd return to the Earth.

"Oh, we'll get back all right," said Pollenport, scrambling on his feet. "Whoever heard of anyone getting marooned on a foreign planet? . . ."

Paris, 1951.

